

*The*  
**X BAR X BOYS**  
*At The* **ROUND-UP**



**JAMES CODY FERRIS**

# WESTERN STORIES FOR BOYS

By JAMES CODY FERRIS

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Individual Colored Wrappers and  
Illustrations by

WALTER S. ROGERS

Each Volume Complete in Itself

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Thrilling tales of the great west, told primarily for boys but which will be read by all who love mystery, rapid action, and adventures in the great open spaces.

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**The X Bar X Boys in Thunder  
Canyon**

**The X Bar X Boys on Whirl-  
pool River**

**The X Bar X Boys on Big Bison  
Trail**

**The X Bar X Boys at the  
Round-Up**

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AND TEDDY DID "RIDE 'IM."

*The X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up.*

*Frontispiece (Page 210)*

# THE X BAR X BOYS AT THE ROUND-UP

BY  
JAMES CODY FERRIS

AUTHOR OF "THE X BAR X BOYS ON THE RANCH,"  
"THE X BAR X BOYS ON BIG BISON TRAIL," ETC.

*ILLUSTRATED BY*  
WALTER S. ROGERS

NEW YORK  
GROSSET & DUNLAP  
PUBLISHERS

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Made in the United States of America

# WESTERN STORIES FOR BOYS

By JAMES CODY FERRIS

## THE X BAR X BOYS BOOKS

THE X BAR X BOYS ON THE RANCH

THE X BAR X BOYS IN THUNDER CANYON

THE X BAR X BOYS ON WHIRLPOOL RIVER

THE X BAR X BOYS ON BIG BISON TRAIL

THE X BAR X BOYS AT THE ROUND-UP

(OTHER VOLUMES IN PREPARATION)

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The X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up



## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE PACK .....	1
II RESCUE .....	11
III ROY'S KNIFE .....	21
IV OVERHEARD .....	31
V HORTENSE RUNS WILD .....	41
VI MR. PETERSON'S FORFEIT .....	51
VII POP WAXES WROTH .....	59
VIII SOMETHING QUEER .....	67
IX THE WILD HORSE .....	76
X ROY'S ROPE .....	84
XI THE FLYING HAT .....	91
XII VOICES IN THE NIGHT .....	101
XIII A DOWN-GRADE PROBLEM .....	110
XIV THE CRYSTAL GAZER .....	123
XV MYSTERIOUS DANGER .....	131
XVI THE START OF THE ROUND-UP .....	138
XVII DRIVING IN .....	146

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVIII TEDDY GETS HIS ORDERS .....	154
XIX INTO THE CORRAL .....	161
XX THE STRANGE FIRE .....	167
XXI THE RUSTLERS' CAMP .....	174
XXII CAPTIVES .....	180
XXIII TOO LATE .....	186
XXIV THE TRAIN OF EMPTIES .....	193
XXV THE RODEO .....	201

# THE X BAR X BOYS AT THE ROUND-UP

## CHAPTER I

### THE PACK

PULLING his pony to a sudden stop, the rider gazed intently at a cloud of dust sweeping over the horizon. His companion, a slightly younger lad, with facial characteristics so similar that anyone would have instantly labeled these two as brothers, reined in his own mount and likewise stared at the dust cloud.

"Coming?" he asked, more to himself than to his brother.

"Going," the other answered decidedly. "And he's not waiting to count his money, either. I'd like to get a look at that hombre, Teddy."

"For reasons of your own, I guess," Teddy Manley responded. Then he laughed. "And to what may we attribute this sudden curiosity, Roy?"

"You know as well as I do," Roy Manley answered shortly. "Just about this time each year I get a craving to know every man who

## 2      X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

rides as close to our cattle as that—and you should, too. With round-up so near, this is no time for fooling.”

“As the African said when the lion sneezed in his face.” Teddy watched the dust disappear as the distant rider sank down behind a hill. Then he turned his head slowly, his gaze sweeping over the panorama of the brown, sun-drenched mountains, walling in the uneven plains like a gigantic picture frame. “Maybe he’s just viewing the beauties of nature,” the boy said, and urged his horse forward again.

“Or on his way to Sunday-school on Monday,” Roy responded disdainfully. “If he’s interested in scenery, what does he ride like that for? He was sure burning up the ground.”

“Oh, well, I give up,” Teddy declared impatiently. “Give that active mind of yours a rest, will you? Let’s get on the job again. Golly, there’s another break! Have the animals around here taken to eating wire?”

Sliding off his horse and trailing the reins over the animal’s head, Teddy Manley drew a pair of pliers from his pocket and walked toward the fence. His brother, grumbling to himself, followed. Riding fence was not easy work, this late in the year. Somehow, there seemed more labor to be done in the fall than at any other time. They had repaired six breaks in the last mile.



"Bring some of that extra wire," Teddy called, fingering the top strand of the fence, which dangled loosely. "This will never reach." He looked at the break thoughtfully, as though wondering how it had occurred. But what he said was: "See if my gloves are hanging on my saddle, will you? My hands are cut now from this stuff."

"Here's the wire," Roy declared, holding out a coil. "And your gloves are in your back pocket. I'll anchor this end while you splice. Say, this looks as though it had been cut!" He seized the wire excitedly and stared at it. "Look how clean this break is, Teddy!"

"Yea, and look how rusty the other end is, too," Teddy said sarcastically. "I just wiped this piece off with my hand. Here—pull hard now, and we'll get this together."

Grunting and straining, Teddy succeeded in forcing the two loose strands together and fastening them securely. When the task was finished he mopped the sweat from his face and the two boys remounted.

"Your turn to take the next break," Teddy asserted, as they rode on. "Hope it's a good one."

"There won't be any next," Roy answered. "We'll have to ride in now and let someone else start from here to-morrow. We're supposed to be at the ranch this evening to talk

## 4      X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

to those two birds from Iowa—the Lefton brothers. Me, I don't like 'em! But dad seems to think that they'll take at least twelve hundred head, so we'll have to dicker with 'em, I guess. Hope we get a good price."

"Why don't you like 'em?" Teddy asked curiously. Roy glanced over at his brother in surprise.

"Teddy, that's the first remark of mine to-day that you've taken seriously! So you, too, think there's something funny about them, do you?"

"I didn't say so," Teddy responded.

"You don't have to say so. Well, spill it! What do you know about 'em?"

"Nothing much," Teddy answered evasively.

"Only they sure asked Nick a lot of queer questions."

"Did they?" Roy looked eagerly at his brother. "What sort of questions? About cattle?"

"Yes, about cattle—our cattle. Nick said that both of them cornered him down by the bunkhouse, offered him cigarettes, and tried to pump him. Nick told 'em that we had fifty head of shorthorns that were being shipped to the King of Siam, in trade for a herd of elephants. He said that we were going to start an elephant farm out here and grow ivory for our own pool balls."

“He did? What did they say then?”

“Nothing. Guess they looked at him as if they wondered whether he was crazy, and wandered off. I heard next they got Gus Tripp, and asked him a lot of questions, too.”

“Mighty inquisitive pair of boys,” Roy commented dryly. “Must want to know all about the cattle they buy. Well, you can’t exactly blame them for that, I suppose.”

“They weren’t asking about the kind of cattle they were, but where we grazed ’em. How many head here, how many there, and so forth.”

“You don’t say! Nick tell you that?”

“Gus did. But he didn’t give them any satisfaction. Gus is too wise for that.”

Roy, his tall body straight in the saddle, his head held rigid, remained silent. After a moment Teddy glanced at him and grinned.

“Six times six is thirty-six and six is forty-two! Come out of it!”

“I was just thinking,” Roy said deliberately, “of the Lefton brothers.”

“You don’t tell me! Why, I thought you were trying to do mental arithmetic. So you were thinking of the Lefton boys! Well, well! Now what could have been the cause of that, do you suppose?”

“I was wondering if they really intend to buy cattle,” Roy went on, refusing to reply to Teddy’s sarcasm. “They’ve been hanging

## 6      X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

around two days now, and never once made an offer. To me, that seems mighty funny. Of course, you, with your superior brain, may think of it differently.”

“Yes, it does look a little like rain, if that’s what you said. Well, to tell the truth, my lad, I had an idea all along that they were a couple of four-flushers. That younger one—Jerry, his name is—talks too loud and too freely. Besides being loquacious, he says too much. And the other—Bill—has a wart on his nose. I don’t like people with a wart on their nose—noses, I mean, maybe warts.”

“We can’t afford to let a customer go because he has a wart on his nose. If they meet our price, we’ll give ’em the dogies, irrespective of what they look like. Tell that cayuse his supper’s waiting for him, will you? We want to get home before dark, you know.”

Checking the reply that rose to his lips, Teddy Manley clucked to Flash, and the bronco lengthened his stride. The brothers were riding on the edge of a shallow gully that dipped down just the other side of the fence. Far to their left the cattle were grazing, content to keep to their own territory and not investigate these two riders. A quarter of a mile farther on, the boys came to a gate in the fence, and went through into the gully. For some distance they followed the ravine, then cut sharp left,



and headed home. By riding through the gully they had avoided a steep hill which lay just within the fence.

The day was drawing to a close. The few clouds in the deep blue sky had gathered on the horizon, like white sheep flocking to the fold. The orange and yellow colors of early sunset were already streaking the heavens. A bird, flying low, left a streamer of purling song behind him.

The landscape was dotted with water-holes, some of them dried up from the long summer sun, others containing only moisture enough to cover the bottom. As the boys rode on, Bitter Cliff lookout came into view, and then it was only a half hour to the X Bar X Ranch.

"Well, whoever does get our stock will get one fine bunch," Roy said suddenly, breaking the silence. "We've never had a finer lot. Healthy, every one of 'em."

"Be a tough break to lose any of 'em now, wouldn't it?" Teddy remarked absently. "All the summer's work gone for nothing."

"Why should we lose 'em?" Roy demanded sharply. "Think our men can't handle a round-up? Bet we don't miss a single cow!"

"Of course, there may be others interested in our cattle," Teddy said mysteriously. "Like those two Lefton brothers. There *are* ways of acquiring cows other than buying them, you

## 8 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

know. In case—snakes! Did you see that prairie dog?”

He pointed to a brown streak that was heading for a clump of bushes. The next moment it was out of sight.

“Prairie dog!” exclaimed Roy. “If that was a prairie dog I’m a grasshopper! Haven’t you ever seen a wolf before?”

“Wolf? You mean a wolverine?”

“I mean a wolf! A full grown one, too! I got a good look at him just before he entered that mesquite. Let’s go get him—he’ll kill a cow, sure, if he gets away!”

Teddy nodded, and touched his heels to the pony’s sides. As they raced over the prairie both boys drew their revolvers and held them in readiness.

“You take the left, I’ll circle around!” Roy panted. “Make sure you don’t miss him. Once he gets very deep into the brush, he’s gone for good!”

Swiftly the riders dashed toward the brush wherein the animal had disappeared. Wolves were most uncommon on the ranges of this country. This one had probably been driven down by hunger from the mountains.

“The one who shoots him gets the pelt!” Teddy yelled. “Let’s go!”

The two brothers swung apart. About three hundred yards from the mesquite stood a group

of quakermasts, and they wanted to cut the animal off from this protection. Even as they neared the brush, however, they saw the wolf dart toward the trees.

Crack! Teddy's gun spoke, and a spurt of dust arose behind the running animal.

Roy fired. The beast faltered, and dropped to his haunches. From his throat came a peculiar wailing cry.

"You got him!" Teddy shouted. "He's—" The sentence was never completed. As if in answer to a call, another wolf leaped from the grove of quakermasts. Then another, and another—almost tumbling over each other in their efforts to reach their fallen comrade, a full pack of snarling, yelping, savage wolves!

The horses, squealing in terror, planted their forefeet in the turf and came to a back-jerking stop. Wildly they swung about, their riders unable to control them in the face of this charging death.

"Don't shoot—no time—get away!" Teddy yelled. "There's hundreds of 'em—"

Glancing swiftly around, Roy saw that this was scarcely an exaggeration. The pack seemed to increase every second. As they reached the wounded beast, a few stopped, but the rest came on. Foam was dripping from their jaws in huge flakes.

"They're mad—crazy with hunger!" Roy

## 10    X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

gasped. "They're starved! If they catch us—"

He bent low over Star's back. There was but one thing to do—ride, and put their faith in their broncos. In the steel-like muscles of Star and Flash lay the boys' only hope of safety.



## CHAPTER II

### RESCUE

WITH necks outstretched, flesh quivering, and eyes white from fear, the ponies flashed across the prairie. Direction was forgotten in the mad rush to escape those dripping fangs now so close.

The ground was uneven, treacherous, and each rider knew that a single misstep would send his horse crashing to earth, the only hope, then, being that the fall, and not the teeth of the ravenous animals, would bring death.

Desperately the boys sought to guide their mounts so as to avoid the frequent badger holes. In a single moment, it seemed, they had left the group of quakermasts behind, and were mounting the side of a small hill.

The broncos were racing side by side, not ten feet apart. After the first hot wave of panic, that minute they had come face to face with what had seemed certain destruction, Teddy and Roy quickly regained control of themselves. The paralyzing shock of fear passed, and left a cool, clear mind, which seemed to register

## 12    X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

impressions more vividly than ever before. Each rider knew just what he was to do if he hoped to escape alive. It was as though a huge screen were before them, with the words: "Over this hill—swing left—turn—and shoot." Neither boy said a word to the other, yet almost as one rider they mounted the incline and bore to the left. Then Teddy yelled:

"Now! We've gained a little, Roy. You take that big gray hunky. I'll get the next one—"

Reverberating from the closeness of the hills, the guns roared their challenge. The gray wolf, that appeared to be the leader, whirled about in a circle, snapped at his side, fell, and lay still.

"There's one down!" Roy shouted, gripping with his knees the sides of the bobbing pony and raising his revolver for another shot. "That may stop 'em!"

The pack, seeing their leader down, hesitated for a moment. Then with the vicious savagery of their breed, they fell upon him.

"Wolf—eat—wolf!" Teddy panted hoarsely. "We've got a chance, Roy! A chance!"

Useless it was to dig frantic heels into the ponies' ribs. They were expending every ounce of energy they possessed, seeking to lose those horrible yappings. Farther and farther away from that surging mass of bodies they coursed,

the wind carrying snarls that drove the frightened horses ever onward. For a moment Roy had a vision of a mangled shape in the midst of digging, prying claws and eager teeth, and the boy grew sick with the thought, feeling that perhaps Teddy or himself might be lying there not motionless, but turning and twisting in obedience to a tug here, a pull there!

"Steady, Flash, steady," Teddy was breathing, the reins tight as iron bands in his hand. "We're all right now, old boy."

"We can't keep this pace up!" Roy called tensely. "We'll kill the brons! Pull him up, Teddy!"

Leaning forward, Roy grasped Star's neck muscles, just below the mane. He talked in a low tone, as evenly as he could, keeping the trembling gasps out of his voice. Behind them the fierce yelps were growing fainter. Gradually the horses took on a calmer, more controlled gallop. Flash snorted noisily.

"All right—I guess," Roy said doubtfully. He exhaled his breath in a peculiar whistle. Star shook his head and whinnied.

"Easy, easy," Roy soothed. "Save it, bronc. Teddy, keep your gun out. That pack won't stay put very long. They'll come again. We've got to head for home as quickly as we can. No time to waste."

Teddy nodded silently. He, too, realized that

## 14 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

the danger was not yet over. But the horses were rapidly recovering their strength, and the boys knew they would be able to respond with another dash when the time came. These riders understood their mounts thoroughly—understood, and loved them.

When a man and a horse are together through long hours of loneliness on the wide plains of the West, when they ride into and out of perils of all sorts, there springs up between them a strange bond, which seems to have something in it other than mere friendship.

So it was with Teddy and Flash, and Roy and Star. Ever since that day they had lost them, when the horses had been stolen from the hitching rail at Eagles, and the boys had risked their lives more than once to recover them, the broncos had come to mean more than mere saddle horses. The story of how they finally caught the horse thieves who had stolen the ponies, and in doing so rid the range of a desperate gang of rustlers, is told in the first book of this series, called "The X Bar X Boys on the Ranch."

These exciting adventures were followed by many others, when Teddy and Roy searched the mysterious Thunder Canyon for Belle Ada, their sister, and her two friends, who had been kidnapped. Then came a hazardous journey down Whirlpool River, to recover some cattle



that had been rustled by Denver Smith and his gang. In the book, just before the present volume, "The X Bar X Boys on Big Bison Trail," the tale is related of a moving picture company on location and of the part Teddy and Roy played in its affairs. How they aided their cowboy friend, Nick Looker, to recover a legacy left by his uncle, is also told.

Throughout all these experiences the two Manley boys had, as their constant companions, Flash and Star. Many times the horses had been the means of saving the lives of their masters. Thus Teddy and Roy came to know them as few masters know their horses—to know their weaknesses, their strength. And both boys realized that, at this moment, should they be compelled to drive them forward before the wolves, they would again answer as they had before.

Teddy saw that Roy, who was leading, had swerved to the right and was listening intently, his hand cupping his ear.

"They're still making plenty of noise back there," Teddy called, but Roy shook his head.

"It's a different sort of noise. We've got to swing pretty wide. They're on the run again. Listen! Notice that new note?"

Truly there did seem to be a change in the

## 16     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

yapping sounds the wolves were making. The boys were on the other side of the hill now, out of sight of the animals, but every moment they expected to see the pack appear over the crest. Teddy rapidly replaced with cartridges the shells that had been exploded, and seized his weapon more firmly.

"It would be worse than useless to face that pack," he said with a slight shudder. "Where in thunder could they have come from? There hasn't been a wolf in these parts for years."

"We'll talk that over later," Roy answered shortly. "The thing to do now is to get out of their way. Let's make time."

Their shadows had lengthened into long, dark blots as the two boys threw their mounts into a gallop. They rode diagonally away from the pack, gradually edging toward the X Bar X. Night must not overtake them here on the range, while the frenzied beasts were still close upon them. Their best chance lay not in out-distancing them, but in throwing them off their track.

"Stick to this trail," Roy said. "We're getting nearer home each minute. Golly, I think we've beaten them! Listen! Aren't they farther away?"

Shrewdly realizing that often one hears that which he hopes to hear, Teddy would not admit that the danger was past. The cries of the wolf

pack could still be plainly heard, and there was no means of telling whether they were coming toward the boys or running at right angles to them. It was not necessary for the animals to see the riders to follow them. Both Roy and Teddy knew that a wolf can track a man by the scent, as a dog does, and unless something occurred to shift the attention of the pack they might chase the boys to the very yard of the ranch.

"Provided we can last that long," Teddy said grimly, finishing his thought aloud. "We may not have a chance to slow 'em up again. Snakes, they sound like a convention!"

"I'll tell a maverick they do! Well, we can keep going only so far, and then—" Roy dropped his hand to the butt of his gun, which he had replaced in its holster. We'll have it out with 'em, I guess. We can never hope to keep this pace up till we reach home."

The two horses were running freely now, but not with the easy lope natural to them. It was more of a forced canter, as though the steeds could feel their riders' anxiety, the tense, dogged helplessness of the hunted. Teddy prayed that they at least might keep the beasts out of sight. To hear them is bad enough, but to see them coming on remorselessly was infinitely worse.

Teddy and Roy were riding silently. Their

## 18    X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

attention was concentrated on keeping their broncos running smoothly and avoiding all ruts and holes which might interrupt the stride. In these moments their skill was invaluable—they sat on their horses as though they were part of them, directing them by slight changes in the position of the reins, by the pressure of their knees.

Before them a small ravine opened. They nosed their horses down, carefully, and headed for the other side. Teddy turned his head as they struck the upgrade.

“Roy! Roy! Flash is limping! I’ll never make it! Here they come!” The boy’s voice was hoarse, cracked. Roy swerved suddenly.

He saw that his brother had spoken the truth. Flash was limping badly, and over the top of the gully poured a tossing flood of brown wolves.

“I reckon, Roy, I’ll stay here,” Teddy panted. His horse faltered, missed a step, and slid backward. Teddy turned him, and halted. “You go on,” he said through clenched teeth. “I’ll take my chances. I can hold ’em back for a while. Take it, you mangy dogs!” He raised his gun, and pulled the trigger viciously.

“Teddy, save it! We’ll stand right here, and if they want us, they’ll have to plough through hot lead to get us! Steady, bucko! Wait till they—”

Yelping triumphantly, the pack reached the bottom of the gully. Roy could see blood on their jaws, still wet from their recent feast made from their dead comrade. Soon, perhaps, they might obtain another food supply. Roy's eyes narrowed, and drawing his gun he took careful aim.

"We'll fire together," he said in a low voice. "And keep on shooting. But they'll never stop now to feed. We either win this fight or we don't. Good luck, ole hoss!"

"Good luck, Brother," Teddy whispered. It was the first time he had ever used the term.

The wolves came on. They reached a spot fifty yards from the waiting horsemen, who sat quietly, holding their mounts with one hand and their guns with the other. The broncos were trembling violently, but still they stood, not panic stricken now, but placing implicit faith in their masters.

"Let 'em have it!"

Crack! Crack!

The roaring thunder of the guns filled the ravine, drowning the savage cries of the wolves. One of the animals was down, another snapping fitfully at his shoulder. But the pack did not halt, nor even hesitate. Before them was prey far sweeter than their own kind.

"Reckon it curtains!" Teddy yelled. "Stick to it, kid! Blast 'em!"



## 20     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

Suddenly, directly behind Roy, a wild shout arose. Guns—many of them—split the air with their reports. There were more yells. A torrent of lead struck into the advancing horde, halted them, turned them, and sent them scampering away, leaving five dead upon the ground. The fight was won, but the bullets that had stemmed the tide had not come from the guns of Teddy and Roy Manley.

## CHAPTER III

### ROY'S KNIFE

As an encore to the heavy cracks of the guns came a voice—low, amused, and dryly sarcastic:

“Reckon you’ll hang the ‘Welcome’ sign on your door for us, hey?”

Teddy and Roy swung quickly around. Facing them, guns out and still smoking, were three men. One of them had a wart on his nose. The second was shorter, and looked a great deal like his disfigured companion. The other horseman, who had made the remark, was a lean grizzled vaquero, whose mouth drooped at the corners, and whose eyes were mere slits in his leathern skin.

“Why, you’re the Lefton brothers!” Teddy exclaimed. “How did you—”

“The same, at your service,” the taller one answered. “And this is Mob Jamisson. You’ll have to figure out for yourself why they call him Mob.”

“Howdy,” Mob said curtly. “Seems like you boys were ready to furnish them animals with a meal, hey?”

## 22     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

“We were,” Roy answered, speaking for the first time. A puzzled frown creased his forehead. Somehow, these rescuers were sneeringly contemptuous of the thing they had done, as though the two lives they had saved scarcely mattered. But at all events they had prevented a dangerous, if not fatal, issue, and Roy’s face cleared as he held out his hand.

“We owe you plenty,” he said heartily. “My brother’s pony would never have been able to make the top of this hill—he went lame. I’m afraid to imagine what would have been the outcome of a scrap with those crazy animals.”

Teddy, who was staring hard at the Lefton brothers, shoved his gun back in the holster and likewise held out his hand, which was grasped by each in turn, as Roy’s had been.

“We were ahead of them, with a fair chance of escape, when my bronc stumbled in a hole,” the boy explained. “Not enough to throw me, but I knew if I forced him he’d cave in. So we turned and decided to fight it out.”

“Pretty sights you’d be if we hadn’t come along,” Mob Jamisson declared. He glanced down at Teddy’s horse. “Left front, ain’t it? Better get off an’ see if it’ll last you till you get to the —till you get home.”

“We’re from the X Bar X,” Teddy said,

watching the man closely. "You've heard of it?"

"Slightly," Mob drawled. He rolled and lit a cigarette. "Well, the excitement seems to be about over. Where'd you pick up them wolves, anyhow? Didn't know they ever traveled much in this country."

"Neither did we," Roy answered. "We saw one, and decided to get him, and before we knew what was happening the whole pack was on top of us. They ran us ragged."

Jerry Lefton, the shorter of the two brothers, spoke for the first time.

"If you want to," he said, "you can come over to our camp and rest your bronc."

"That's nice of you," Teddy answered. "But it's getting pretty late. Say, by the way, I thought we had a date with you fellows this evening to talk over a cattle deal? We were hurrying home, trying to make it on time—"

"Teddy, I think we'd better rest Flash a bit," Roy interrupted hastily. "Which way is your camp? If it isn't too much trouble—"

"None at all," Mob declared. "Guess you can pay for what you eat."

Teddy and Roy stared at him in surprise, and Jerry Lefton made haste to put in:

"He was just fooling. We'll be glad to have you. Over this way 'bout a mile. Guess your bronc can make that all right."

## 24    X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

“Sure,” Teddy answered. “He’s not hurt badly.” A question was trembling on his lips, but, noticing Roy’s face, he refrained from asking it. “Those wolves will wander away soon,” the boy substituted. “I don’t reckon they’ll hang around here.”

“Not long,” Bill Lefton, he with the wart on his nose, added. “They travel where there’s the most chance for food. Say, your range is near here, isn’t it? Hope your cattle stay bunched. I pity the cow that walks alone with that pack around.”

“They’ll bunch,” Teddy declared shortly. “We don’t aim to have any of ’em injured, or taken.”

Bill Lefton looked at him quickly, but Teddy’s head was turned away. He seemed to be intent on some object down the gully.

The five riders swung about, and, led by Mob Jamisson, made their way slowly along the steep side of the ravine. After a short journey they turned sharp right, and ascended.

During the ride Teddy had an opportunity to study his companions. The Lefton boys he had met several times before, and a more intimate acquaintance had not increased his liking for them. He realized, of course, that they had earned the gratitude of himself and Roy. But he could not free his mind from a vague distrust of them.



This Mob Jamisson, now—Teddy had never seen before, but he had heard of him. Among the cattle ranches his reputation was none too savory. There were certain incidents of strange marking of cows, of selling diseased stock, in which his name had figured. Nothing definite, but in the West a rumor of that sort usually has some basis in fact. Teddy wondered how the Lefton brothers had met him. Then he recalled that they were new to this section, and, like as not, had run across him accidentally. It seemed well to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Whatever had been Roy's motive in accepting the invitation to visit the Lefton camp was not brought out as they rode along. The talk was purely general—of weather conditions, of the possibility of the wolves returning. All agreed that it would be a good thing to chase the beasts out of that region as soon as possible. They were a constant menace to man and cattle.

The conversation that followed continued until the camp was reached, and as they sighted the three pup tents, darkness was fast approaching.

"We've been making this our headquarters for a while," Jerry Lefton explained, as he saw the look of surprise on the faces of Teddy and Roy. "You see, Bill and I may locate

## 26    X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

here permanently, and we wanted to get a look at the country."

Even this, thought Roy, was scarcely a reason for staying out on the prairie when much more comfortable accommodations could be had at Eagles. But he kept his thoughts to himself and accepted the explanation at its face value.

"Better let me look at yore bronc's laig," Mob Jamisson suggested. He dismounted, as did the others, and raised Flash's front foot. The horse shied slightly, but when Teddy put a hand on his neck he stood quietly. "She's sprained, but not bad," Mob pronounced. "Won't hurt to ride him. Fact is, it'll keep it from gettin' stiff."

"That's how I figured," Teddy answered. "So I reckon we'd better be getting along home. I guess we won't have any more trouble with the wolves."

"Stay and have some grub with us," Jerry said loudly. "You'll miss your supper anyhow, and there's no sense ridin' on an empty stomach. What say?"

"I guess we'd better—" Teddy began, when Roy interrupted.

"Sure we'll stay! I'm hungry, I don't mind saying. If you like, we'll pay you for whatever we eat."

"Certainly not!" Bill Lefton said angrily.

"Mob was joking when he said that. Weren't you, Mob?"

"Um—suppose so," Mob answered ungraciously. "Great little joker, me. Sit down boys, an' fill up."

While Jerry started a fire, Mob and Bill "rustled" the food. When twilight made its farewell bow, the bacon and beans were sizzling over the flames. The boys had no fear that they were causing worry at home by staying on the range longer than they had expected to. Early that afternoon they had started riding fence, and they knew Mr. Manley would realize that something had occurred to delay them. He was confident of their ability to take care of themselves under all circumstances; they had proved that, many times. And whatever fears Mrs. Manley had for them she kept to herself. Never would she let them see that she worried when they were unaccountably absent. Long ago she had determined that the best way to bring up her sons was to make them independent, self-reliant. She knew that continual expressions of worry would only hinder their growth into what she wanted them to be—true men, sons of the West. They never realized that she had spent many sleepless nights wondering, praying for their safety when they were from home on a mission of danger. She wished them to be brave, and she, herself, held

## 28     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

forth the shining example. What she was, her sons would be.

The meal at the Lefton camp was soon concluded. No mention was made of buying or selling cattle, although Teddy several times suggested that the round-up was soon to take place and that his father expected several buyers from the East. Each time either Jerry or Bill Lefton changed the subject rather hurriedly, and when Teddy and Roy arose to start their journey home both realized that it was practically useless to count on these brothers to take any of their cattle.

They remounted, and turned their broncos, homeward.

"Yore horse all right now?" Mob inquired, motioning with his head toward Flash's leg.

"Sure! O.K.," Teddy replied. "He'll step lively on the way to the ranch. Thanks, again, for all you've done for us. If ever we get the chance, we'll repay you."

"Don't reckon you'll get the chance," Jerry answered, a bit gruffly. "We'd do that for anybody. So long!"

"So long! Much obliged!"

The boys rode out the circle of the firelight.

The three men were standing, watching them depart. Soon they were swallowed up in the moonless night.

Silently the lads rode, for fully five minutes, and then Teddy said:

"Get what you went after, Roy?"

"Huh? What I—oh! Yep, I did. I found out one thing—they're not cattle buyers. It may have seemed foolish to hang around when we should have started home, but I figured we might as well learn all we could about the Lefton brothers. And I learned enough."

"Yea?"

"I learned, for one thing, that they did not intend to go to the X Bar X to-night to keep their appointment with dad. They'd rather drop in unexpectedly, it seems."

Another period of silence. Then:

"It was lucky they showed up when they did. We've got that to thank them for," said Teddy.

Roy nodded.

"Check! Well, if we get the chance, we'll wipe the slate clean. I don't like to be in their debt. Something tells me we may have to put them on the other side of the books soon."

Teddy was about to question this enigmatical statement when Roy suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"Hang the luck, my knife's gone! I must have dropped it out of my pocket when we were sitting around the fire. Snakes! I hate to lose that. It was the one dad gave me for my birthday last year—silver mounted, you know. Say,



## 30    X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

I'm going back for it. You wait here. Soon as I get it I'll shoot back. No use both going—and Flash has a sore leg. You stick right by this bush. I won't be a minute."

"Wait! I might as well go along! Flash is all right. He's—"

But Roy had started. Teddy shook his head and prepared to wait as he had been told to do.

"Funny brother I got," he murmured. "He can't tell me he didn't drop that knife on purpose. He should have been a detective." Then he chuckled. "Wonder what sort of story he'll have when he gets back?"

## CHAPTER IV

### OVERHEARD

WHEN Roy Manley left Teddy alone by the bush and went through the night toward the camp he had just left, two thoughts were paramount in his mind. One was that he hated to trick his brother with the knife story. The other was that Mob Jamisson had not met the Lefton boys accidentally.

As to the first, he had no need to give himself concern. Teddy had not been fooled. He knew, he was sure, that the tale of the lost knife had been only a ruse to allow Roy to return without being laughed at if his efforts at spying bore no fruit. And as to the second thought, it was based on sound reasoning.

A man who has just become acquainted with another does not pitch camp with him on the prairie unless they agree to be partners in some sort of enterprise. Hence the three pup tents indicated one thing—that the two Lefton boys and Mob Jamisson had joined forces. For what purpose Roy could not even speculate, but he was satisfied that it had nothing to do with

## 32     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

Sunday-school—not with Jamisson having a hand in it.

By this time Roy could see the red haze of the campfire, and he dismounted and led Star forward. He felt uneasy at repaying the hospitality of his hosts with such a questionable procedure, but, telling himself that the end justified the means, he went on.

Star, he knew, would be as silent as himself, and he had no fear of discovery until he chose to show himself. If, by chance, they did find him out, he could always claim that he had returned after the lost knife.

As to the exact reason of this night sally, Roy was not even certain himself. It was on impulse that he decided that this was the one time to learn as much as possible about the Lefton brothers.

Why had they asked all those questions of the X Bar X hands when they did not intend to buy cattle? And surely it was plain now that all thought of purchasing cows had departed from their minds, if, indeed, they had ever held such thoughts.

When they had first come to the X Bar X, they purposely gave the impression that they were cattle buyers. Why? It seemed now to Roy that they had never had any real intention of entering into negotiations. If they had meant actually to buy cattle, why had they

dropped the project, even before terms were mentioned?

Thus it seemed to Roy that his conduct now was perfectly logical. He knew that Teddy would scoff at the idea of spying on the Leftons and attempt to dissuade him from his purpose. But Roy, romantically inclined, saw things in a different light. He determined to play the part of investigator.

The low tones of the three men reached him as he drew nearer the camp. As yet he could not distinguish words, but placing his hand over Star's nose to avoid any possibility of discovery he walked quietly closer.

He saw that Mob Jamisson sat with his back toward him and that the other two faced Mob. Jerry was talking in excited tones.

"—easily six hundred head," he was saying. "Fine, splendid cattle! Healthy! I tell you that you people out here don't realize what it means to have cattle like that."

"But how?" Bill questioned. "The cars—"

"Getting cars would be a cinch! Nothing to it! Why, it's only an eight mile run, you know."

"That's a fact!" Mob broke in. "Eight miles isn't far. The old Jarmey place—"

"Wait!" Bill raised his hand. "I heard something. If it's— You! What the mischief—"

## 34 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

"I dropped my knife," Roy answered steadily, moving closer to the fire. His hands hung at his sides, limp, innocent of weapon. "Just rode up this second. See it around here, any of you? Silver, with my initials on it."

"You just rode up, you said?" Mob demanded springing up and striding forward. "How comes we didn't hear you, hey? First thing we know you're on top of us. You've been listening—"

"What difference does it make?" Roy asked calmly.

"What? Say, you—"

"I said, what difference does it make how I came up? I tell you I lost my knife and came back for it. Why all the argument? What's wrong about losing a knife? The way you talk you'd think I'd overheard something I should not have. What do you think I am, anyhow?"

"He's right, Mob," Jerry said quickly. "You must be pretty nervous to-night. I can't figure out why you're making such a fuss myself. Go ahead, look for the knife, Manley. We'll help."

Mob Jamisson, realizing that he was beaten, subsided. He looked at Roy intently. Just how much of their conversation had the boy heard? He could not ask without indicating that there was something he wished to keep secret.

As Roy bent over the ground, Mob's hand fell to his gun—then came slowly away. He



had seen the firelight glitter on metal at Roy's side—and guns in holsters do not reflect light. Chin in hand, he stood contemplating the youth.

"Got it!" Roy exclaimed suddenly, and straightened. He held an object in his hand. "Found it hidden under a stick. Lucky, hey?"

"It is lucky," Bill said quietly. "It would have been too bad for you to come all the way back and then not find the knife."

"I'll tell a maverick it would!" Roy answered easily. If the Lefton brothers had expected him to show embarrassment at the pointed statement he was disappointed. "Well, I'll be getting along. Thanks for helping me."

"Sure you got everything now?" Mob asked truculently. "Yore hat? Belt? Ain't lost yore pants, have you?"

"Don't think so," Roy answered seriously. "Nope, I'm sure I haven't. But thanks for asking. Hold still now, bronc, while I climb up. Right. So long!"

There was no reply. Chuckling, Roy rode off into the night.

He found Teddy easily, and together the two boys started homeward. After some moments Teddy inquired:

"Find it, Roy?"

"Uh-huh."

Silence, except for the hoof-beats of their mounts. Then, Teddy:

"Nice night, isn't it?"

"Wonderful!"

"See here, you secretive bronco-buster, if you think I'm going to ask all sorts of silly questions—"

"All right, laddy!" Roy burst out laughing. "All I needed was coaxing. Now you tend to your knitting and I'll tell you the story of my journey to Walla-Walla land. I arrived all safe and sound, and stood on the door-step a moment before ringing the bell. Voices came to me from an open window." Suddenly he became serious. "Teddy, what has the Jarmey place got to do with autos? Are there any cars kept there?"

"Cars? Not that I know of. Unless you mean freight cars. There's a siding near there, you know."

"Freight cars! Golly, I never thought of that! Cars! Well, yes, they might be freight cars. Anyway, that's what the voices were talking about. Cars and the Jarmey place and something about an eight mile run. And—oh, yes, cattle. Six hundred head."

"Who said that?"

"Jerry Lefton. Can you figure out what he may have meant?"

"Not me. We'll see what dad has to say about it. Got your badge on?"

"What badge?"

“Detective.”

Roy chuckled and urged his pony on.

As they rode into the ranch yard, past the bunkhouse, Nick Looker called to them:

“You fellers must have been puttin’ up a new fence.” He came closer, and they waited for him. “What happened to Flash? Fall?”

“Not quite,” Teddy answered. “He stuck his leg in a hole at a very embarrassing moment. We almost had supper with a pack of wolves.”

“Wha-a-a-at?”

“Fact! We met a whole gang of ’em. You and Gus had better do a little hunting in the morning.” And the story was told.

Nick expressed his surprise that the animals should be in this region, and promised to see that they were driven out. When he heard about the Leftons’ part in the affair he nodded sagely.

“Thought they might be around here somewhere. With Mob Jamisson, hey? Better tell the boss. He’ll be interested.”

Of all the cowboys on the X Bar X Ranch Teddy and Roy liked Nick Looker as well as anyone. Nick was generous to the core, as had been evinced when he had inherited quite a sum from an uncle and had promptly helped one cowboy out of a financial hole, squared up with another for losing his six hundred dollars, and then aided some distant relatives who suddenly

came to light and proved to be poor. And on top of all this he had distributed some of the cash between his bunkhouse friends not by giving it to them direct but by pretending to lose to them at cards.

Mr. Manley was not quite so interested as Teddy and Roy thought he would be, even after hearing of the remarks about "six hundred head" and "Jarmey's place," and "cars."

"Just talk, I reckon," he declared. He pulled the ends of his long black mustache and looked at his sons quizzically. "No need to tell mother about the wolves. She's got enough to think about."

"But, Dad," Teddy persisted, "what do you make of the Lefton brothers?"

"Don't make anything. I'm certain that they don't want to buy our cattle, for all their questions, an' that's all that interests me. Let's go in." They had been standing on the porch of the ranch house. "See Nick when you came by?"

"Yes, he's over at the bunkhouse. Come on, Teddy, we'll say hello to mother. Guess my detective work went for nothing; hey, Dad?"

Mr. Manley laughed and placed a hand on his son's shoulders. He was tall, this ranch owner, with a pair of eyes that were as keen as the day he rode the ranges as a puncher. "You stick to it, Roy. Never mind what Teddy

says. I suppose he laughed at you for sneaking back for your knife?"

"I did at first, Dad. But not when Roy told me what he had heard," Teddy answered seriously. "I'll bet that meant something—about the cars and the rest of it. But I reckon you know best."

"We won't say anything to mother about the wolves. We're glad enough to forget 'em," added Roy.

"So it was that close, eh?" Mr. Manley looked at his sons keenly. They had not told him exactly how near they had been to death, not wanting to seem important. Their father guessed, however, what they left out.

"Pretty close, Dad," Roy answered in a low voice. "We have the Lefton brothers and Mob Jamisson to thank that we're here."

Mr. Manley drew a corncob pipe from his pocket and filled it. He lit it and exhaled a cloud of smoke before he spoke.

"I'd rather see wolves on four feet than on two," he said slowly. Then, raising his voice: "Belle Ada wants to visit at the 8 X 8 to-morrow. You two go along with her. See you later." He strode down the steps and walked toward the bunkhouse. Teddy, watching him go, grinned.

"Dad is getting your habit, Roy. I'd like to know just how much he does think of that

## 40     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

conversation you heard. Two-legged wolves! Well, the more we learn the less we know. Come in, my child, your bed-time approaches. Oh-h-h, snakes, but I'm sleepy!"

Stretching high, he kicked open the door and entered the house.



## CHAPTER V

### HORTENSE RUNS WILD

WHEN the Manley boys came down to breakfast the next morning they found their mother waiting for them at the foot of the stairs. Her soft blue eyes, her blond hair, with never a streak of gray in it, her pretty, unlined face, would make one doubt that she could have two such large boys as Teddy and Roy for sons.

"Good morning, night-hawks," she gaily greeted and kissed them. "I suppose I'm not to know what kept you out until all hours? Last evening you said hello and good-night to me. No, never mind. We have corn bread and bacon for breakfast. Mrs. Moore made it especially for you. Did your father tell you where you were going to-day?"

"You mean to the 8 X 8 with Belle?" Teddy asked.

"That's right. I hope Curly and Nell are there."

"Why? Have they gone back to the city?" Roy opened his eyes wide.

"No, Roy, they haven't," Mrs. Manley

## 42     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

laughed. "You rose to the bait splendidly, however. I'm sure you'll see them."

"Don't worry about that, Mom," a girl's voice called from the next room. "Think they'd visit the 8 X 8 without seeing Nell and Ethel?"

"Come out here, Miss Manley, and say that," Teddy laughed, blushing. "It's a good thing a wall is between us."

"Oh, is it?" Belle Ada, her face wreathed in a grin, came to the door. "Mother, protect me! Now how about it, Mr. Smarty?"

"Get to the left of her, Teddy," Roy said in a loud whisper. "I'll take the other side. Now!"

"Let go my hair! Moth-er! They're spoiling my—my coiffure!"

"Your what?" Teddy demanded, halted in his tracks. "Say that again!"

"Coiffure!"

"Where's that book?" Roy shouted, making a dive into the room Belle had just left. He reappeared in a moment, holding a volume in his hands. "Look at this, Teddy! 'Lady Gwendemere's Secret!' Oh, boy! So that's where you get your big words from, sister mine! Let's see—" He opened the book. " 'There was a moment of silence as Lord Morleigh raised his glass. Then, in a voice fraught with passion, he cried: 'To the fairest woman in

the world! A jewel incomparable! May she—' ”

“Give me that book, Roy Manley!” Belle, her face aflame, snatched it from him. “Don’t you go snooping into my affairs! I guess I can read what books I want to.”

“Within limits, my dear,” Mrs. Manley corrected, and smiled. “It wouldn’t do for you to feed on too much silly fiction, you know. Upstairs I have a volume containing essays by famous writers.” Mrs. Manley had been a school teacher before her marriage. “Suppose you get that and read it for a while?”

“Yes, Mother,” Belle said dutifully, and started for the stairs. Then, with an expressive grimace, she shook her fist at Roy. “I’ll fix you for that, Roy Manley!” she threatened in a vibrant whisper. “You see!”

“Better get some of that corn bread, quick,” Teddy laughed, as he started toward the breakfast room. “You’ll need it, when Belle has decided what form her revenge will take!”

The meal was soon concluded, and the boys made ready for their trip. They were to go in one of the ranch cars, although Belle wanted to ride her pony. But due to the fact that she would have to take a bag with her, Mr. Manley said the auto would be more convenient. Per-

## 44    X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

haps he did not care to have his daughter take the long ride to the 8 X 8 with wolves in the vicinity.

"You can borrow a pony from Mr. Ball," he told her. "The weather looks a bit uncertain, an' I don't want you to get caught in a storm. Yes, I think you'd better take the car."

By nine o'clock the young folks were on the road. Life on a ranch begins at seven in the morning, and to a cowboy anything between nine and twelve is the "forenoon."

To all outward appearances, Belle had forgotten the debt she owed Roy. But Teddy noticed her staring frequently at his brother with a speculative look in her eye.

"She'll make him pay somehow," he chuckled to himself. "I hope she doesn't include me in her plan of vengeance."

They reached the 8 X 8 a little after twelve. They were compelled to drive slowly on account of the condition of the roads, and arrived at the Peter Ball ranch later than they had expected. Nell Willis and Ethel, or "Curly," Carew, who had been informed of their coming, were sitting on the porch as they drove up. These two girls were nieces of Peter Ball. Their home was in New York, and they had been staying with their uncle while their parents were traveling in Europe.

"Greetings, voyagers!" Ethel called out, and

ran to meet them. "How's the sacred chariot running?"

"Great!" Teddy answered. "Hitting on all thirteen. Hello, Nell—here's Roy."

"I see him," Nell laughed. "Belle, these brothers of yours haven't changed much, have they?"

"Well—" Belle considered. "Teddy is about the same. But Roy, you see, he's—Oh, excuse me, Roy, I almost forgot. It nearly slipped out."

"What's all this?" Ethel answered curiously. "Nell, here's something we must look into!"

"It's nothing. She's only kidding," Roy declared, his face red. "She's getting back at me for finding her book at home this morning."

"Finding my book at home—that's right," Belle said demurely. "Come, boys, take your little sister's bag into the house. What are you blushing about, Roy?"

"I'm not blushing," Roy retorted furiously, and quite inaccurately. "Don't pay any attention to her, Nell."

"But, Roy, there's really no need of your getting flustered," Belle said seriously, looking up into his face. "I didn't tell—what I wasn't supposed to—did I?" she finished in a thrilling whisper.

"I don't know what you're talking about,"

Roy said, turning his head away. "Hand me that bag, will you, Teddy?"

"Sure," Teddy answered, grinning. "Me-thinks your sins are finding you out, young man!"

"But what is all this about?" Ethel demanded. "Roy, have you been up to tricks?"

"No, I haven't! I told you Belle is only getting even! All right, go ahead, have your fun. Some day you'll—" he was walking rapidly up the steps with the bag and the rest of the sentence was lost.

"I guess we're square now," said Belle, chuckling gleefully. "Poor Roy! He gets excited so easily! Teddy, you go and console him. He'll set fire to the house with that face of his."

A hail from across the path caused Teddy to abandon his intention of following Roy into the house. Bug Eye, grinning from ear to ear, stood waving at him.

Bug Eye had always been a character and was getting more and more so every day. Ordinarily he was a cow puncher; but he drove Mr. Ball's auto and spent all of his odd hours in inventing things or in improving his mind—so he said.

"Go see what he wants," Nell suggested. "He's been pestering us for two days wanting to know just when you were coming over. I think he has something he wants to show you."



Teddy answered the call, and walked over to the young puncher just as Roy came down the steps.

"Howdy, Bug Eye!" Roy shouted, as he saw his friend. "What's the news?"

"Nothing much," Bug Eye answered, and, stepping forward, he grasped a hand of each of the boys. "Long time since you visited us, ain't it?"

"Been kind of busy. Near round-up time, you know," Teddy replied. "But what happened to you? Every day I expected to see that old flivver of yours come rolling in. Where have you been?"

"Workin'," Bug Eye said mysteriously. "On a new invention."

Teddy looked significantly at Roy.

"What sort of an invention, Bug Eye—perpetual motion?"

"Nope—tain't that. Though some day I'm gonna work on that. This here is a machine for cuttin' grass all by itself!"

"Cutting grass!" Roy exploded. "But where under the sun is any grass you can cut around here? Not counting on—"

"It ain't fer use here," Bug Eye interrupted pompously. "This is for importation. You wait here. I'll show you."

While Teddy and Roy stood in mute expectation, Bug Eye disappeared within the bunk-

house, to reappear in a moment dragging something heavy behind him.

"Give us a hand," he panted. "I had it hid behind the door. Golly, she's some heavy! Pull, now! Here she comes! Look out!"

In obedience to a strong tug, a strange and fearsome contraption rolled out of the doorway, rumbling as it came. Four wheels were mounted on what had once been the square top of a table. Set in the center of the table top was a gasoline motor from a flivver. This motor had two flywheels, each with a belt, one to drive the machine along the ground by turning the rear wheels, and one to cause a series of long knives beneath the table top to revolve.

"There she is!" Bug Eye said proudly. "The wonder of the age! What do you think of her?"

"Well," Roy began, looking at "her" dubiously, "I can't tell just yet. Will it grind coffee?"

"Can't say—never tried her out for that," Bug Eye replied seriously. Then his face brightened. "But I'll bet she would, at that! Now I'll show you how she works. Let's see—we'll run her across the yard an' back for a starter."

"Where do you sit to drive it?" Teddy inquired curiously.

"Who, me? I don't sit no place! That's the beauty of it—she drives herself! Goes along,

cuttin' the grass, then when she gets to the end of the yard she turns an' comes back. Wish we had some grass to cut, but you'll get the general idea. First I gotta prime 'er."

Holding an oil can in his hand, he bent over the motor.

"What's that you have there?" Teddy asked.

"Gas. She runs on kerosene the rest of the time. Economical, hey?"

He squirted gasoline liberally over the motor, and enough of it evidently reached the petcocks, for in a moment he laid the can aside and busied himself with the numerous levers set in the side of the machine.

"Now she's ready!" he proclaimed, straightening. "Just stand aside, for we don't want no accidents to happen. When Hortense gets goin' she just naturally mows down everything within reach."

"That's our cue to move," Roy muttered. "All right, Bug Eye, let 'er rip!"

The puncher seized the larger flywheel and swung it over. The motor coughed twice, then was silent. Once more he turned the wheel.

The machine awoke with a sullen roar. Bug Eye had not thought to put a muffler on it, and the sounds of its resurrection could be heard for at least a mile. Then, slowly, ponderously, it started to move.

"Yip-ee! Watch her go! Step on it,

## 50     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

Hortense! Show 'em what yo're made of!"

The machine seemed to take Bug Eye at his word. There was a sudden shriek of metal upon metal, and some part of the contraption went sailing into the air. As though Hortense had gotten rid of something that had been bothering her for years, she took a new lease on life with this eruption. Her wheels—all of them—spun rapidly around. The knives underneath whirred and flashed. Like a being with a single, definite purpose in view, she leaped across the yard.

"Her reverse is busted!" Bug Eye yelled. "She won't turn now! Snakes, I can't stop her! Watch out!"

With a metallic bellow, Hortense continued on her wild career. Suddenly, midway on her journey, her front wheels turned and she swung to the left. As she plunged along Teddy gave a cry.

Hortense was headed directly for Mrs. Ball's favorite bed of lilies!

## CHAPTER VI

### MR. PETERSON'S FORFEIT

"GOOD-BYE, flowers!" shouted Teddy Manley, and ran closer to the scene of impending disaster with a vague notion of doing something to stop the onrushing monster. But as he took another look at the murderous knives, he slowed up and halted. It was hopeless even to think of causing Hortense to hesitate.

Mrs. Ball, attracted by the noise, rushed out to the porch, followed by the three girls. When she saw the machine bearing down upon her precious lilies, she let out a shriek of dismay.

"Stop it, somebody! Stop it! My flowers!"

"Might as well try to stop a herd of wild elephants!" Roy yelled. "Bug Eye, can't you—" he turned toward the puncher. To his surprise Bug Eye had vanished.

"Where in thunder is that bucker?" he called. "Bug Eye! Come out here!"

By this time Hortense had approached to within ten feet of the flower bed. Mrs. Ball leaned over the railing, calling frantically for someone to do something.

## 52     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

“My lilies! My lovely lilies,” she groaned. “Can’t you stop that thing? Bug Eye! Where—”

“Comin’, ma’am!”

Teddy and Roy swung around toward the bunkhouse. They saw a figure burst through the door, arms waving. It was the missing puncher.

“I’ll stop her or bust!” he exclaimed. “Get ready, boys. You gotta’ help me pull!”

Then they saw the reason of his haste. In his hand he held a lariat, and as he ran he began whirling it about his head.

“Yip-ee! Go get him!” Teddy shouted, and sprang after Bug Eye. “Rope ’er, cowboy!”

Faster and faster spun the rope. Now it was making a perfect circle over the running punchers.

“Toss it! Be too late in a second!” Roy exclaimed.

But Bug Eye knew his business. Just at the moment when Hortense was about to fall upon the flowers and grind them under her flashing knives, the buckler threw. Like a striking rattlesnake the rope snapped forward, and the loop settled hungrily full about the raised motor.

“Yay! He made it! Grab hold, Roy! Yank!”

Yank they did. Three pair of well-muscled arms seized the rope and pulled.

The lariat jerked taut. Hortense, on the very



edge of the flower bed, was halted. She seemed to pause uncertainly, as though an unwelcome stranger had tapped her on the shoulder. Then, with a protesting roar, she reared on her hind wheels and fell over backwards.

"Yow! Hog tie her, Bug Eye! Three seconds flat! That's first prize, sure!"

Like some giant bug, Hortense lay on her back with her wheels spinning madly. Her roar gradually sank lower and lower. She coughed once—twice, trembled in the throes of a death struggle, and yielded up the ghost. The flowers were saved.

Bug Eye, his face drawn into lines of despair, contemplated the wrecked machine. Then he sighed.

"She's done for," he said sadly. "Poor Hortense! Just temperament, that's all ailed her!"

"Just—just—" Roy stuttered, and choked. "She was only eccentric, Bug Eye! That's all! Poor—"

"Bug Eye Wilson, come here!"

Mrs. Ball, her head thrust forward, stood on the steps. "Come here to me!"

"Yes, ma'am," and Bug Eye, sighing profoundly, walked meekly forward. As he passed the still form of his beloved Hortense, with the rope, like a long, thin tail, still hanging from her, he shook his head and muttered:

"You weren't long for this world, old girl!"

Motor busted clean off the chassis. Well—”

“Bug Eye, what do you mean by sending that engine of destruction on to my flower bed?”

“I didn’t go for to send it on to the flower bed, ma’am,” Bug Eye answered gently. “That was her own doin’s. I aimed her across the yard, an’ the rest she did herself. Reckon she got tired of the straight an’ narrow.”

Speechless, Mrs. Ball stared at him. Then with a what-can-you-do-with-a-man-like-that gesture of her hands, she turned and entered the house.

The girls, who had stood watching the scene, let out peals of laughter. The woebegone expression on Bug Eye’s face changed not a bit as he rested a hand on one of Hortense’s wheels. To think that he, himself, had been the cause of his beloved’s untimely decease was an added reason for sadness.

“Cheer up, Bug Eye. You may be able to fix her,” Teddy called, struggling hard against laughter.

“Nope—she’ll never be the same,” the puncher sighed. “Her life is finished. But I sure saved the lilies, didn’t I?” he added in a brighter tone.

“You certainly did,” Roy agreed. “I never saw a neater exhibition of roping in my life. Think he ought to get a prize, girls?” he called to Belle and her friends.

"He should—and I'll see that he does!" Nell promised. "If I have to bake it myself. Which do you like, Bug Eye—apple or lemon?"

"Huh? Oh, that's all right. I'm used to tough breaks. Don't worry about me. Maybe it's better off this way, anyhow."

"He's still thinking about Hortense," Ethel whispered to Nell. "He was so anxious to show Teddy and Roy how it worked, and the first time he took it out it smashed. Let's go in and leave him to his dead darling!"

Bug Eye, with the help of Teddy and Roy, at last carted the remains away. And before they had decently disposed of her behind the bunkhouse Bug Eye was aflame with a new idea—a way to utilize the parts for which Hortense had no more use.

"Off with the old love—on with the new!" Teddy laughed. "What's this one to be, Bug Eye?"

"I'm not sure yet," the puncher answered musingly. "Maybe a fire extinguisher. Maybe—well, anything. But I know one thing! It won't have no way to move about!"

Teddy and Roy, with faces that were prone to grin suddenly when some incident of the runaway Hortense was recalled, wandered about the yard, leaving Bug Eye to his thoughts. They had decided to start back in an hour or so, in order to be at the X Bar X for supper. Anx-

ious as they were to prolong their visit, so that they might talk to Nell and Ethel, they knew there was plenty to be done at home. Round-up season is a busy time for all.

Soon after dinner they said good-bye to the girls and started. The ride home was uneventful, and they reached the ranch at four-thirty. As they drove the flivver into the yard they saw that their father was talking to a stranger down by the corral. When they had put the car away he called them over.

"Boys, this is Mr. Peterson," he said. "These are my two sons, Mr. Peterson—Teddy and Roy."

"Howdy!" the stranger greeted them. He offered his hand. The boys thought they had never shaken hands with a man who seemed so lacking in muscle. The hand was soft and flabby and limp.

Mr. Peterson was short, but not plump. Somehow, he appeared unsubstantial, as though even a fair punch could knock him over. Neither Teddy nor Roy realized that they were thinking of punching in connection with Mr. Peterson.

"He wants some of our dogies," Mr. Manley continued. "Six hundred head, I think you said?"

Roy started, as if the figure brought some thought to his memory.

"Six hundred—that's right," Peterson replied. His voice was like his manner, querulous, overbearing. "Of the best you got."

"Don't worry about that. What you pay for, you get," Mr. Manley declared shortly. Teddy got the impression that he shared their dislike of the man. But business knows no likes or fancies.

"There's one condition, but don't suppose it makes much difference to you," Peterson said. "The firm I work for is in the habit of requiring the seller to post a forfeit, so we'll sure get the cattle we bargain for. Just a matter of form—but the firm demands it. That's all right with you, isn't it?"

"A forfeit?" Mr. Manley turned toward the boys. "Ever hear of that bein' done before, Roy?"

"Once in a while," Roy answered. He looked at his father queerly. Why had he asked him a question the answer of which he must have known himself?

"Once in a while, hey? Well, Mr. Peterson, I guess we can accommodate you. How much do you need?"

"Five hundred," Peterson declared. "You can put it in the bank at Eagles. Now that that's settled, I'll pay my deposit, just to make matters shipshape. Here's five hundred on our part. That enough?"

## 58    X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

“Plenty. In fact, it isn’t necessary,” Mr. Manley said. “We do a great deal of business on trust out here. But you’re the doctor.” He thrust the roll of bills into his pocket. “Now where and when do you want these cattle shipped?”



## CHAPTER VII

### POP WAXES WROTH

PETERSON passed his hand over his chin as though he were thinking up the answer to this last question. But his hesitation was too obvious to be real. Roy knew he had made his choice long ago.

"Know where Red Rock is?" he asked finally.

"Sure," replied Mr. Manley. "Jump-off place. Tracks run upgrade there. Pretty high, where the station is. Why?"

"Thinkin' I'd like the cattle delivered there. Railroad gave me an option on some box cars that are restin' on a siding at Red Rock. Might as well use them—save money in the end. Well?"

"You mean you'd rather have the cattle driven there instead of to Eagles?" Teddy interrupted.

"That's it. If they went to Eagles they'd have to go by the regular route. You get the idea?"

"Partly—partly." Mr. Manley hitched his

belt up and glanced about him. "Reckon your price entitles you to have 'em driven where you want 'em, within reason. Teddy, just get my account book, will you? It's in the top drawer of my desk. I want to put this all down."

"That's the way I like to do business," Peterson declared a trifle importantly. "Have everything in black an' white. I been in this game now for eleven years, an' I never lost nothin' yet by puttin' it on paper."

Then, as Teddy returned with the notebook, he began to tell the items off on his fingers:

"First, I gave you five hundred dollars deposit. Second, you agreed to post a five hundred dollar forfeit, to become mine in case of non-delivery. Third, six hundred head of your best cattle. Fourth, they're to be delivered at Red Rock. I'll let you know the exact time later."

"An' fifth, it looks a mite like rain," Mr. Manley drawled, closing his book. "All right, Mr. Peter Peterson. I'll see that your orders are obeyed to the letter."

"I didn't mean to sound like a sergeant," Peterson said uneasily. "Just wanted to make certain you had it all straight."

"Sure! I know. Well, I reckon I have. Course, I'm a new man at this game, you might

say, an' I appreciate any advice from a man who knows more than I do."

"So? A light appeared in Peterson's eyes, then died down, like a door suddenly closed to conceal the entrance of the house from passers-by. "I kind of thought you hadn't been at this so long. You ain't got the look of a veteran rancher. Well, I hope we succeed in puttin' this deal through."

"Hope so," Mr. Manley repeated, smiling innocently. "Well, so long, Mr. Peterson. Thanks!"

"You're welcome," Peterson replied pompously. "Always like to help anyone. Cattle dealing is a risky business. There's always some crook in it trying to get the best of an honest man."

"That's right," Mr. Manley agreed solemnly. "You can't be too careful."

Mr. Peterson nodded, and mounted his pony which had been standing quietly near by. Then, waving his hand genially, he rode off.

"He cuts quite a figure, according to himself," Teddy laughed. "So you're a new hand at this game, Dad?"

"I couldn't help that," Mr. Manley said grinning. "He was too all-fired sure and certain of everything. And a man with a hand-shake like his always did set me on my ear."

"Felt like a piece of mutton," Roy com-

## 62     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

mented. "He wanted to tie you up tight with his forfeit, didn't he, Dad?"

"Oh, well, we don't have to worry about that. We'll make delivery all right. The thing that strikes me funny is wantin' the cattle driven to Red Rock instead of Eagles. His story of the cars he's rentin' sounds fishy. It's much cheaper to send them over the regular route. But that's his business. Belle Ada get to the 8 X 8 all right?"

Teddy replied that she did, and told his father about Bug Eye's latest venture and its result. Mr. Manley laughed heartily over the description of the puncher's skill in roping Hortense, and then Teddy and Roy went in to wash for supper. At the table the talk veered naturally around to the rodeo to be held on the thirtieth of September at Silver City, a large town seventy miles from Eagles.

"Round-up will be finished by the twelfth anyway," Mr. Manley declared. "Pass the bread, Teddy. Suppose you boys are countin' on entering?"

Teddy and Roy looked at their mother. She smiled, and nodded.

"Of course they are!" she declared. "They're certainly not going to stay out on my account."

"That's the stuff!" Roy exclaimed, his eyes alight. He reached over and seized his

mother's hand. "You're a game sport, Mom! But we'll be careful—no bulldogging, or stuff like that. I'm going to try for the fancy riding prize."

"Trick ridin', we used to call it," Mr. Manley said. "You'll need lots of practice for that, Roy. Better begin soon."

"I am. To-morrow, if I get a chance. How about you, Teddy?"

"Brone riding," Teddy declared laconically. "And there's one more I'd like to try—wild cow milking."

"Wild cow milking!" Mrs. Manley repeated. "Is that really a contest, Teddy?"

"I'll say it is!" her husband broke in. "In my younger days that was one of the big things." He chuckled reminiscently. "I remember one year when they held the events at San Antonio. Me, I thought I was the champion wild cow milker. Pop can tell you about this, 'cause he went in it too. Well, I gets my pail in action right away. Goin' fine, for the first five seconds. Then things started to happen. Anyway, I didn't win. But neither did Pop."

"Bardwell, I can't imagine you trying to milk a cow," Mrs. Manley laughed. "What other contests do they have, boys?"

"Anything you can think of," Roy answered. "Calf roping, steer bulldogging—eight hun-

## 64 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

dred pound steers, too. Races, bell calf roping—”

“How is that done?”

“Usually they have five riders, and six calves to be roped. The one who ropes his calf first then gets his lariat over the calf with the bell on it—they have only one of them—wins.”

“They rope those poor little calves!” Mrs. Manley exclaimed. “I should think it would hurt them!”

“Only their dignity,” Teddy laughed. “Say, Roy, how about trying for the Pony Express? You could use Star and Flash and that other pony I broke this spring. You’d have a good chance of coming through in that. Don’t you think so, Dad?”

“Sure,” Mr. Manley answered forcibly. “I want to see one of you boys get a prize. Reckon we’ll go down an’ watch ’em, hey, Mother?”

“Yes, I’d like to very much,” said Mrs. Manley, in a small voice. Then she looked at her husband anxiously. “I suppose no one gets hurt in those—those things?”

“Not often,” Mr. Manley assured her. “Seein’ as how this is the first one the boys have ever been in, I reckon they’ll be plenty careful. You’ve never even seen one, have you, Mother? We’ll have to go, sure. When that there band gets playin’ an’ a ridin’ fool is on top of a pony that’s headin’ for the sky, an’ all the people



are yellin' an' shoutin'—by jinks, it makes you tingle all over! I been waitin' for the day my boys would be big enough to get in the rodeo. An' I want to see one prize, even if it's only a booby prize."

"We'll steer clear of that one," Roy declared. "I'm going to get Nick and Pop to give me some pointers. Come on, Teddy, we'll go over now and talk to them!"

"You're excused," Mr. Manley chuckled. "Golly, Barbara, how it does bring back the days I used to ride in those events! The first one I went in kept me awake the whole night before, thinkin' of it! Now I got two grown sons to keep up the good work. Guess we haven't had such a bad time of it after all, hey, girlie?"

"You talk like a grandfather!" his wife laughed. "Run along, boys—your father is getting sentimental! But do be careful of those—those wild cows, won't you?"

The boys found Nick Looker, Pop Burns and Gus Tripp playing mumblety-peg on the ground in front of the bunkhouse. They stood for a moment watching the game, until Nick gave up in disgust when he took a small slice out of his hand. Declaring that the light was too uncertain for a master to show his stuff, he arose.

"I see yore dad talkin' to another cattle dealer," he proclaimed. "Anything stirrin'?"

## 66     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

On the X Bar X the hands were treated almost as partners in the business, so Nick's question was perfectly proper.

"Made a deal," Roy answered. "Six hundred head. Dad had to post a forfeit."

"Don't like this forfeit business," Pop Burns declared. Pop, as the oldest man on the ranch—and the baldest—took upon himself the privileges of seniority. Needless to say his place in the sun was hotly contested by the other punchers.

"Too easy to lose money that way," he continued. "I remember one time—"

"Carry me back to old Virginy!" Gus caroled. "Where the—"

"Funny, ain't you?" Pop sniffed. "But let me tell you one thing! I was bustin' broncos when you was bustin' baby crackers. An' that's no song, either!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### SOMETHING QUEER

"TAKE it easy, boys," Teddy chuckled. "Pop, go on with your story. You were saying—"

"Talk to these bow-legged skillet-curlers? Not me! I wouldn't waste breath on 'em. Maybe when round-up time comes they won't be quite so chipper. I've known buckers to welch before this."

"Here's one that won't," Nick declared. "Go ahead, rave on, cld man! Now, Teddy, I think we were talkin' business when so rudely interrupted. About those cattle—"

"What we came over here for was to get some dope on the rodeo," Roy broke in. "While we've seen 'em, of course, we've never been in any. Teddy and I are going to have a try for some of the prizes."

"Rodeo? Listen, brother!" Pop exclaimed. "I'll give you the low down on them events. There's one thing you want to be careful of—steer bulldoggin'. There's nothin' in it, an' it's too dangerous. It ain't worth the trouble. Now

## 68     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

wild cow milkin'—there's somethin' for your money! I used to be a great little milker myself. One time, down San Antonio way, I milked a—"

"Dad told us about it," Teddy laughed. "He said you—"

"If he told you, there's no use repeatin' it," Pop said hurriedly. He appeared somewhat taken aback. Roy wondered what his interpretation of the occasion would have been. "But anyway," he continued, "that's great sport."

"We were thinking of entering that," Roy explained. "That, and trick riding and bronco busting. Maybe pony express. Dad says he's coming to watch us."

"Try an' keep the boss away," Gus chuckled. "Especially with his sons ridin'. When you boys gonna practice?"

"Every day, from now on," Teddy declared. "Any suggestions will be appreciated. Pop, we're counting on you to help us out."

"Any time, boys, any time. 'Bout three years since I went to a cowboy reunion, but I guess I ain't forgotten."

"How many years?" Nick inquired, with a grin.

"Three, I said! Well, maybe a little longer. But, anyway, I'd like to see a prize or two come to the X Bar X. Ain't had any since yore dad was in the ring. He was the one who could

nab 'em! Don't suppose he said much about how many he won. Most likely told about the ones he missed up on. Right?"

"That's right," Teddy laughed. "No wonder he was anxious to have Roy and me cash in for a prize. Well, we'll do the best we can. Now there's something else I—that is, Roy and I—want to talk about. Nick, what do you know about the Lefton brothers?"

"Nothin' more than I told you, Teddy, except that I didn't take to 'em much. When you told me they was pallin' with Mob Jamisson I wasn't much surprised."

"Uh-huh." Teddy nodded understandingly. "Roy, here, heard some funny remarks they made when they didn't think he was listening. Did he tell you?"

"Told him most of it," Roy said. "You know—about the cars and the eight mile grade, and the rest of it. You couldn't make much out of it, could you, Nick?"

"Nothin' at all. But—"

"Eight miles from where?" Pop interrupted.

"Maybe from the Jarmey place. That mean anything?"

"Well, not exactly," Pop said slowly. "That Jarmey place is an old station that used to be a shipping point. Only thing it's good for now is to keep rats in. An' there's plenty of them.

Say, who was this geezer what wants the six hundred head, Teddy?"

"Peterson, his name is. Peter Peterson, I think. Ever hear of him?"

"Never did. He must be new on the job. Like as not he's an agent for a Chi. firm. They have men in this section nearly all the time now. Hope the boss makes a good deal with him."

"Dad says he offered two dollars a head more than any of the other buyers," Roy declared. "Didn't even try to get a lower rate. But that may be his way of doing business—knows what he wants and goes after it. We won't kick about that. Still, that forfeit idea is a new wrinkle—at least, for our ranch. Gus, and the rest of you, see if you can get any dope on him, will you? Ask Jules and Nat Raymond. If you hear anything, let us know."

Teddy and Roy had thought to inquire more about the Lefton brothers and to ask Nick's opinion of them. But with the introduction of an added topic—concerning Peterson—the new interest overtopped the old one, so far as cattle buying went. It was now important that Peterson be given consideration.

Gus, who was to go to town to-morrow, promised to make inquiries about Peterson.

"Chances are I won't hear anything, though. He must be representing an Eastern firm. Two



dollars more a head than the others, hey? Must be made of money."

"But we ought to find out *something* of his qualifications," Roy objected. "Certainly, they'll know about him at the freight office. He said he's been in this business a number of years. Tried to give dad advice." Roy smiled. "Dad took him for a little ride, but Peterson didn't know it."

Teddy and Roy were to make a trip to Red Rock the next day, to look over the territory where the six hundred head were to be driven. So after a little more talk with Nick and the other hands they sought their beds.

They started for Red Rock early. Flash had entirely recovered from the slight sprain he had received in the flight from the wolves, and he whinnied with the joy of living when Teddy headed him toward the open range.

"Running well, isn't he?" Roy remarked, as, riding close to his brother, he watched Flash's feet tap the ground.

"Sure is! I'm depending on him to help us cop a prize at the rodeo. And, believe me, Star is no slouch either!" He motioned with his elbow toward Roy's pony. "With these two, we ought to get something."

Roy grinned, and the two rode on. The chill of the fall morning had given way to the warmth of Indian summer. Ahead of them a jack-rab-

bit scurried across the path. The mountains gleamed green and white beneath the early sun. In the distance a river threaded its way between banks of quakermasts and evergreens.

Roy breathed deep of the tonic air.

"It's good," he said simply, "just to be here."

Teddy did not laugh. He, too, was beginning to realize more of life. There had been a time, not long ago, when this remark would have brought a smile to his face. But now he thought seriously that it *was* good to be here. Thus, quickly, youth comes into its heritage. But humor is not diminished. Rather, it is increased.

The two brothers had been long together. They had been through many trials and dangers. Between two such a bond, firm, unbreakable, is established. There was no selfishness in either one. If occasion came, one would cheerfully, willingly, offer his life for the other.

Both seemed to feel something of this sentiment as they rode the range toward Red Rock. They had, of course, been vividly reminded of it that day they had been menaced by the wolves. Perhaps they were thinking of this, for it was some moments before either spoke. But youth is buoyant, not introspective. The mood passed. And when Teddy, apropos of nothing, declared that Bug Eye would see many a day go by be-

fore Mrs. Ball let him try his inventions near her flower bed again, Roy laughed.

"Poor Bug Eye! He always manages to get in wrong. Remember his Fishmobile? Wonder what happened to that? And the time he got interested in hypnotism, and Pop let him think he had him hypnotized. I'll never forget that."

"Me, either. Bug Eye thought sure he had him under his spell. Then Pop showed him up. Say, how far is it to Red Rock?"

"Plenty far. Lucky there are no steep hills on the way. Reckon we might as well choose this route to drive those cattle over. Peterson wants to give us all the trouble he can, I reckon. Be much simpler to take 'em to Eagles, as we've always done. We'll earn that two bucks a head extra, I'm thinking. He must have had this journey in mind when he made the offer."

"Uh-huh. Maybe, and maybe not. He was a fish, that man. I hate to talk about another behind his back, and especially when I've only seen him once, but—well, I just don't like him!"

"You and me both. But, as dad said, you can't afford to let your liking interfere with business."

"Dad didn't say that. I did. It's true. So we'll forget Peterson till we learn something about him. Perhaps Gus will have found out from the boys in town what kind of a man he is."

"I doubt it. But we'll let the matter rest, anyhow. What we want to do is to select the best way to take the cattle to Red Rock, and this looks like it. Let's get a wiggle on."

They urged their horses forward, and finally came into sight of Red Rock. The town itself was much like Eagles, but smaller. The railroad station was the center, and as they rode in the boys saw that a large corral opened out at the rear of the depot. They looked over this well, and decided that, after all, they might not have much more trouble in bringing the cattle here than they would in bringing them to Eagles.

"Not as many people to bother us, at any rate," Teddy declared, and he halted his pony in the center of the dusty main street. "Three stores and a row of houses back there. Looks like a deserted village."

"Not quite deserted," Roy said in a low voice. "Look there."

Teddy swung around. Three men had just stepped from behind the corner of the station. They were talking earnestly, and did not see either Teddy or Roy.

As they came closer Teddy uttered an exclamation.

"The Lefton brothers—and look who's with them!"

It was Peter Peterson, the man with whom

their father had, only yesterday, closed a contract.

"Let 'em see us," Roy suggested quietly. "There's something queer about this."

Snatches of the talk drifted toward the waiting boys.

"—plenty of cars"—"easy to get"—"only an eight mile run—"

"What the mischief—" Teddy began, when he was interrupted by the roar of a train pulling in at the station. As the three men heard it they turned hurriedly and ran for the platform. Another moment, and they had entered one of the cars, leaving Teddy and Roy staring after them. With a shrill whistle the train puffed away from the station.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE WILD HORSE

“THAT,” said Roy deliberately, “is pret-ty blamed funny.”

“All of what you just said. Hear what they were talking about?”

“Couldn’t help it. Seems to be a habit with those Lefton boys—that eight mile stuff and about the cars. We’ve got a nice little jig-saw puzzle to fit together, Teddy, my lad. How come Peterson knows the Leftons? Can you tell me that?”

“Ask me something easy,” Teddy returned musingly. “What I’m interested in is the meaning of this line of talk. We couldn’t very well yell at ’em and tell ’em we were here, and not to talk so loud. Oh, I forgot, you’re a detective. That’s right. We’re privileged to listen.”

“That was a nasty crack, Teddy,” Roy said, and grinned. “I suppose you’re referring to my losing my knife that night and going back for it. Well, it’s lucky I did. Forewarned is forearmed, you know.”



“You really think there’s something to this, do you?”

“I’m sure of it! Hold up there, Star—stop that prancing! Now listen, Teddy. First thing that happens is that the Leftons come to the X Bar X and make motions like cattle dealers. But are they? Not so you could notice it! Then they ask Nick and some of the others all sorts of questions about where our ranges are located and how many head we have in certain places. If they don’t want to do business with us, what’s the big idea of that? Then I hear ’em talking about cars being easy to get, and six hundred head, and the Jarmey place. That wouldn’t be so bad, but, by jinks, here comes Peterson, who *is* going to buy our dogies—or so he says—and they mention the same things again! And don’t forget we saw the Leftons with Mob Jamisson! By golly, Teddy, that chase by the wolves was one of the luckiest days in our lives, even if we did come near passing out of the picture! We know where we are, now!”

“Oh, do we?” Teddy chuckled. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, suppose you tell me just where we are, brother mine!”

Roy looked down at his pony, and coughed.

“Don’t take me so literally. I mean we know what to watch out for. This Peterson’s with the Lefton boys. The Lefton boys are in with

Mob Jamisson. *Ergo, et cetera*, or what have you?"

"A bag of nothing, I guess," Teddy answered. "You seem to be able to build up the finest suspicions I ever saw, Roy. Trouble is, we've started looking at this thing from one angle, and we can't see it from any other. All these things may mean absolutely nothing. We told dad of what you heard when you went back for your knife, but he didn't think much of it. You see, we're biased. We can't figure clearly. Every time the Lefton boys come into the picture we're looking at it through fogged glasses. What we want is a disinterested viewpoint."

"Yes, but there's this side of it too, you must remember." Roy was leaning over his saddle, forgetful that he was standing in the center of the main street of Red Rock. One or two men who had wandered out of a store regarded the two boys curiously, but they were oblivious of their audience. Roy was absolutely, intensely serious, as was Teddy.

"You've got to look at it this way, Teddy," Roy continued. "We've actually seen and heard all this. Anyone we'd tell it to would be getting secondhand information. He couldn't judge how it impressed us. The most everyday matters may mean a whole lot more if you can see them happening instead of hearing about them.

The tone of a person's voice, his actions as he's speaking, all figure in. A first impression is usually correct, I've heard, and I believe it. And my impression is that this Peterson and the Lefton boys are up to some mischief that has something to do with us!"

Teddy thought for a moment, his chin resting on his hand. So still was he that Flash turned his head inquiringly, as though to be sure his master was still with him. At last the boy spoke, saying slowly:

"All right, Roy. You've about convinced me. But what of it? What can we do? Nothing except to tell dad to be careful in his dealings with Peterson. And he'd do that anyway. Dad is no fool—he knows the kind of people he bargains with. And he knows Peterson is questionable, too. How can I tell that? By the way he looked at him. So the best thing we can do is to keep our suspicions to ourselves until something turns up. When we get home we'll ask Gus what he found out about Peterson. And, if dad questions us, we'll tell him what we think. That's as far as we can go. We don't want to make mountains out of molehills, you know."

Roy nodded.

"You've got the answer, Teddy. We'll play our own little game. And if anything crops up we'll be ready. We won't say anything about

## 80     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

seeing Peterson here. Now let's get back. I want to put in a little practice riding for the rodeo. Won't hurt you to do some, too, if you want any of the prizes."

"Check! We'll go." They turned the horses and rode down the street and out of the town. The two men who were standing on the side watched them go. One of them faced the other.

"Say, Jack," he drawled, "where'd the crowd come from? Circus here?"

That was Red Rock.

The boys reached home, told Mr. Manley that the trail to the shipping point was in fair shape, and went again into the yard to start their practice. Nick was waiting for them.

"Which one of you goin' in for bronco ridin'?"

"I am, Nick," Teddy answered. "Why?"

Nick motioned him over.

"Got something here you might be interested in," he chuckled. "Came while you were gone. I asked Nat Raymond to bring it in for me from Sanborn's Point. Yore dad wanted a new horse. Here it is."

He led the way to the corral. "It" proved to be a small mustang, whose fiery eyes and nervous movements proclaimed that this was his first experience with civilization.

"Pete Lazerus caught him last week, an' he's been keepin' him near his camp over at the

Point, where's he located. The bronc ain't never been rode."

Teddy walked close to the bars and observed the animal intently. He noticed the full chest, the legs with hard bunches of muscle behind them, the long head with the ears lying flat against the skull.

"No need to tell me that," he said grimly. "Anyone ever try?"

"Pete—for about three seconds," Nick chuckled. "He sold him cheap. Said when he wanted dynamite he'd buy it in boxes, not wrapped in hoss flesh."

"Pop around?"

"Yep. He's been waitin' for you, too. Yo, Pop!"

"Comin'!"

The veteran rancher ambled toward them.

"Goin' to teach him manners, Teddy?"

"Going to register him for a course, anyway," Teddy laughed. "May take a day or so. Nick, will you ride in and cinch him for me—you and Pop?"

"Sure. Git yore bronc, Pop. Need two of us to do this job. What leather you want, Teddy?"

"My own. I'll drag it off Flash."

He did this, and returned with the saddle. By this time Pop and Nick had mounted and were within the bars of the corral. Roy was

## 82     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

sitting on the top rail, with a rope held ready in his hand.

"Just in case," he explained.

The wild pony strongly resented any interference with his liberty. When Nick rode up to him with a large handkerchief in his hand, to blindfold him before putting the saddle on, he shied and refused to stand. Nick unwound his lariat.

"Have to coax him, I reckon."

The rope flew through the air, and settled full over the mustang. An instant of struggle, with Nick's mount standing as firm as a rock, and suddenly Pop cast. With two ponies holding the bronco, between them they managed to put on the saddle and cinch it.

"Buck strap, Teddy?"

"Not any! Leave him open. All right, put the handkerchief on."

Quickly Nick secured the cloth in place over the bronco's eyes. The horse stood perfectly still, but was trembling violently.

"He's plumb full of action," Pop declared. "Careful, Teddy. Hold him now, Nick. Climb aboard, Ted! All set?"

Teddy, his face moulded in stern lines, settled himself in the saddle. He grasped the reins, and straightened up.

"All set, Pop. Raise the curtain."

The two lariats were thrown to the ground.



Nick, leaning over cautiously, put his hand on the eye cloth.

“Here she goes!”

He pulled the handkerchief off with a snap.  
The bronco was free.

“Stand clear!”

## CHAPTER X

### ROY'S ROPE

LIKE a carved statue the bronco stood, silent, immobile. As an arrow pauses for a moment at its zenith before descending. As a gunner, intent on destruction, takes deadly aim before he pulls the trigger. Thus the bronco stood.

Suddenly his back arched. His feet bunched together. Seemingly without effort he arose straight into the air.

"Stick to him! Stick—"

He came down stiff-legged. The shock jerked Teddy's head forward. The boy grunted, and those watching saw his hand come down on the horse's flank in a tremendous slap.

"On your way, baby! Take me off!"

The bronco leaped to one side and turned like a reed in a whirlwind. Then he sprang upward again.

"Don't let him roll, Teddy!" Nick, prancing about on his own horse, was yelling with excitement. "Hang on, boy!"

Teddy hung on. Not with his hands, but

with his knees alone did he remain upright. He had not "gone to leather."

The horse, frustrated for the moment, remained quiet. But he had only begun to open his bag of tricks. Of a sudden he reared high, came down, and rolled sideways. He hit the ground with a thud.

But Teddy was ready for this—was waiting for it. As the horse neared the ground he slipped from the saddle and stood straddling the pony as he lay on the earth, and when the bronco leaped up again Teddy was in the saddle.

Pop shouted his approval.

"That's the stuff, Teddy! Fooled him then! Yea, bo! Look at him ride!"

Maddened to find that weight still on his back, when he had expected to dislodge it easily, the pony began a series of bucks that caused the watchers to gasp with fear for Teddy's safety. The boy pulled his hat from his head and slapped the pony with it.

"He's fannin' him! Go to it, puncher! Make him hang out the white flag! Snakes, did you see—"

Discarding for a moment his frantic jumping, the bronco headed for the bars of the corral. Reaching them, he swerved, and sought to scrape Teddy off. The boy's leathern chaps prevented real injury, but Roy saw his

brother's face go white with the pain of the shock.

"Nick!" he called. "Get between him! Want me to take him, Teddy?" He stood upon the second rail from the top, bracing himself, and loosened his lariat.

"No! No! Don't throw! I'm all right! This bronc is mine!"

"Full of nerve, that kid," Pop said in a low voice. "Get close to him, Nick."

The cowboy had already started. As the wild horse skirted the bars, Nick put himself between the rails and Teddy. Every time the bronco made for the corral fence he found Nick's horse blocking his way.

He gave this up with a suddenness that was characteristic. He pranced like a dancer toward the center of the enclosure.

"You've got him, Teddy!" Roy shouted gleefully. "He's shown about all his stuff!"

It seemed as though Roy was right. Gradually the horse became calmer. The whites of his eyes went under, and more of the pupil showed. The stiffness went out of his legs.

"All right, pony," Teddy said soothingly. "Let's run around a bit, hey? Now—into a gallop!"

He let the reins hang slack. The horse looked around inquiringly, puzzled for a moment. What happened next is still unexplained by

those watching, and Teddy has only a hazy idea of it. It was all too quick—too unexpected.

The strap binding the saddle to the horse—the cinch strap—parted. Terrified at this sudden sensation, the pony started bucking again. There were three other girths about the belly, but these broke like paper ribbons. The hind feet went up in the air, and Teddy and the saddle shot over the bronco's head.

Teddy lit with arms out-stretched, taking the shock evenly. The moment he hit the ground he rolled, and avoided the pony's hoofs by a fraction of an inch. Dazed, he staggered to his feet.

"Stay there, Teddy! Don't move! I'll get him!"

It was Roy, standing upright on his perilous perch, lariat whirling in a wide circle.

The pony, seeing a defenseless man before him, and realizing that here was the author of his misfortunes, started forward, snorting viciously. His lips were drawn back and the teeth showed white and savage. All his former rage again took possession of him.

Nick and Pop leaped their horses toward the maddened bronco. Even then they could see that their efforts were useless, that the wild horse was too close to Teddy for them to reach him on time.

"He's done! Roy, he's—"

At that moment the loop left Roy's hand. Strangely, he thought of Bug Eye and his automatic lawnmower as he watched the loop snake out. In time of great stress one's mind plays queer tricks.

Teddy was too weak from his fall to move. He stood there, arms before him to ward off the brute, and waited for the end.

But the pony never reached him. Roy's lariat settled over the bronco's neck. Like a flash the boy twisted the end he held about a post.

With a jerk that drew from him a scream of pain, the pony's dash was halted. He twisted, and bit at the rope that held him. In that second Nick and Pop bent low in their saddles, seized Teddy, and carried him to safety.

The pony was still struggling with the lariat as Roy ran toward his brother. There was no more danger now—the rope was firmly on, and each movement of the horse drew it tighter. At present he had no time for living enemies with that coil of fire about his neck.

“Teddy! Are you—”

Teddy laughed weakly.

“Nope, not quite, Roy. Just a little numb. I didn't expect that fall. Maybe—” he staggered, and Roy seized his arm.

“You come over to the house now. That was one bad spill. Look here—don't cave in yet!”



"No danger." Teddy smiled at his brother. "Just bent over to see if my legs were still there. They feel kind of—missing."

Pop chuckled.

"Don't wonder, son. If that'd been me I'd have felt all missin'. But Roy's right—in the house for yours. What under the sun made that cinch strap break?"

Teddy shook his head. "It's beyond me. Everything happened so quickly I didn't have time to take an observation. Roy, that was a wonderful throw of yours. Standing on the rails! If you hadn't, I—"

"Just what Bug Eye did to stop his lawnmower," Roy declared, and grinned. "Funny, as the rope left my hand I was thinking of him. I figured he could do it, so—"

Teddy reached out and rested his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"I'll let you get away with it, Roy, old boy," he said quietly. "We won't talk about what would have happened if you'd missed. Let's get out of here."

The three walked toward the gate. Pop and Nick had dismounted, and had turned their ponies loose. They watched Teddy carefully, to see that he was able to walk without assistance.

"Don't bother about me," the boy laughed as he saw them staring at him. "And for the love of Pete, don't anybody mention it

## 90     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

to mother. I don't want her to worry."

"If she worried, Teddy, you'd never know it," Pop said in a low voice. "She knows a man on a ranch can't be safe all the time. She'd take it standing up, and never a whimper out of her."

They came to the gate, and went through. Teddy turned and looked at Pop.

"You're right, Pop. In all my life I've not heard her say she was afraid. Roy, let's go in. Want to put some liniment on my leg."

Nick and Pop stood at the foot of the steps as the two brothers entered the door of the ranch house. They gazed in open admiration at the departing figures.

"The best thing I can say about 'em—" said Nick musingly, "the thing that takes in all the rest of it—is that they're the sons of their mother and father. Come on, Pop, let's eat."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE FLYING HAT

STIFF and sore in every muscle, Teddy arose from his bed the morning following his disastrous ride and bent over experimentally. Roy, who had a bed on the other side of the room, grinned widely.

"Are you a little stiff from bowling?"

"I'm a big stiff from bowling. Where is Bowling, anyhow, that so many stiffs come from there? Golly, if someone took a swing at me now I'd break right in two. Say—" he sat on the side of the bed and observed his brother—"suppose the cinch straps break in the rodeo. Does it count as a throw?"

"Hum! Have to ask Pop about that. Don't see why it should. Now take that pony yesterday, for instance—you had him beaten. It wasn't your fault that the girths broke. He was trotting for you when it happened. You went over his head like a skyrocket, I'll tell a maverick!"

"Don't I know it! There'll be no more of that, though. When I ride him again, which

## 92     X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

will be to-day or to-morrow, I'll make certain sure that the straps are O.K. Baby, when I saw that bronc coming for me with his teeth sticking out, I thought I'd never see a cinch strap again! Well, it's over now—and luckily, thanks to you. Oh-h-h-h, but I'm stiff! Wow! See if you can take the kinks out of my back, will you?"

Teddy removed his pajama shirt, and Roy doused him liberally with liniment. Then he kneaded the back muscles vigorously as Teddy lay face downward on the bed.

"Uh—uh—have—a—heart! Ouch! What—you—using, anyway? Iron balls? Oof!"

"Only my hands, Teddy; only my hands," Roy said, grinning. "You've got to get used to this. Wait, there's a spot right between the shoulderblades that I haven't touched. There she is."

"Yow! I'll say she is! Go—easy! Finished? Thank goodness!" Teddy sat up, blinking. "That was fun for you, wasn't it? You should have been living in the days of the Inquisition. Bet you could have gotten a job. Let's see now." He stretched, cautiously. "By golly, it is better at that! The ache's mostly gone. Yep, Roy, you're some doctor!"

"Certainly! Had to hurt a little—all good doctors do. Or else the patient doesn't get his money's worth. Now you hop into your clothes

and we'll see how much bacon and eggs we can put away. They'll make you forget your troubles. Come on, I'll beat you getting dressed."

Teddy, however, refused to race. He said he was in no condition to try for athletic laurels. He took his time, and when he reached the breakfast table Roy had already started on his second course.

Mr. Manley smiled as he saw how carefully his son eased himself into the chair.

"'Fraid of breakin' it, Teddy?"

"Uh-huh. Can't bear to see a chair busted. Never forgive myself."

"Broken, Teddy, not busted," Mrs. Manley corrected gently. "I'm thinking it's more than the worry over that chair that is bothering you. Would you like to try that trick of standing on your hands for me, Teddy?"

Teddy swallowed, and coughed.

"Well, Mom, maybe later. I'm hungry now. Norine—" this to the waitress, who was bringing in some more bacon—"will you please ask your mother if she has any corn bread?" Mrs. Moore, the mother of Norine, had been housekeeper and cook at the X Bar X for a number of years.

Norine, a young, pretty Irish girl, dimpled and declared that the kitchen was never empty of anything "for the likes of yourself and Mis-

ter Roy." The corn bread, very hot, was brought in.

"Had something of a jolt last night, I hear, Teddy," remarked Mrs. Manley, after Teddy had helped himself to the corn bread.

"Huh? Oh— Who told you anything about it, Mom?"

"Do you really think much goes on concerning my children that I do not know about?" and Mrs. Manley laughed.

Belle Ada looked up from her corn bread and syrup.

"Then there's me, Teddy. Don't you suppose that I know all that goes on on this ranch?"

"Oh, it was you, Miss Pry! That explains everything."

"Yes; and it's a good thing that you have a sister to keep an eye on you."

After the meal was concluded the boys walked to the corral and viewed the bronco that had thrown Teddy. He looked docile enough as he stood eying them, and Teddy determined to ride him without delay. Roy was for waiting until afternoon, but Teddy vetoed this, and together the two boys managed to saddle the horse. He remained perfectly quiet, even when Teddy put a hand on the saddle horn.

"Never mind the blind," he said. "Something tells me this bronc is cured. You watch."



Before Roy could utter a word Teddy had vaulted into the saddle. But nothing happened. The animal moved calmly about the corral as correctly as any school horse, and after a few minutes Teddy dismounted.

"Anyone could ride him now," he declared. "Glad I decided to climb aboard before he forgot me. Hope the brones in the rodeo will be as easy to stay with."

"Let's forget that rodeo for a while," Roy suggested. "There are a few things more important just at present—Peterson and his offer for our cattle, for instance. See Gus yet?"

"How could I? I've been with you all the time. Let's wander over and see if he's around."

The boys found Gus Tripp near the hitching-rail preparing to ride through the country near Mica Mountain and investigate the condition of the ground. He had his bronco saddled, and was mounting as the boys came up.

"Got time to wait a second, Gus?" Teddy called.

"Sure! Reckon you want to know what I found out about Peterson. Well, the answer's easy—nothin'. Yore dad asked me, too; an' when I told him no one in town had ever heard of him, he looked sort of worried. Tell you how it is—a man likes to know somethin' about a man he's dealin' with, especially when it's a

large order like this. Course Peterson did put up a deposit; but there's plenty of things can happen between now an' the time he puts the purchase price in yore dad's hands and takes delivery. I don't blame the boss for askin' questions."

"So no one knew him!" Roy mused for a moment. "I suppose, actually, that that fact alone doesn't mean much. But, you see, Gus, this Peterson is acquainted with the Lefton boys." Roy glanced at his brother, for they had decided not to tell anyone of their discovery. But in the face of Gus's statement, it seemed best that the whole thing be laid on the table. Teddy nodded his approbation. "And you know how those Lefton brothers' deal fell through, after practically demanding we tell 'em all about our business. Of course that's exaggerated, but you get what I mean."

"Yep, I get ya'. Well, I guess we can't do nothin' about it. I better be gettin' along now. See you later." Gus waved and rode off.

Teddy and Roy stood there for a moment, watching him go. Then they walked slowly toward the house.

"I'm thinking," Roy mused, "that the mole-hill we were talking about a while ago has increased in size. Maybe it'll grow to a fair-sized mountain after all."

"Um! In other words, things are stirring.

Let's take a ride over to the south range. Remember where we found so many breaks in the fence? We can do a little repair work on the side. I don't think dad wants us for anything special. I'll ask him before we go, to make sure."

Teddy found his father talking to Nat Raymond, both standing by the side of one of the ranch wagons. He waved to Teddy, and called:

"Hey, take a look at what we got here. Maybe you'll recognize some of 'em."

"What? Recognize—"

He reached the wagon and peered in. Then he gave a low whistle of amazement.

Within were the bodies of some ten or fifteen wolves.

"He cleaned that gang up for you, Teddy," Mr. Manley said. "Remember when I sent the boys out to chase these critters off the range? They didn't have so much luck then, but Nat, Jules and—who else was with you, Nat—Joe, wasn't he?—they went out yesterday and did a little fancy shootin'. I feel more easy, now—didn't like Belle Ada to ride around with these things roamin' the hills. Some nice pelts there."

Teddy reached out and touched one of the dead wolves.

"This big one, Dad, was probably the leader. The rest—those that are left, I mean—will

scatter now. Good work, Nat! Wish I could have been there when you brought these down. Where'd you run across them?"

"Near Sanborn's Point. We just stood still an' picked 'em off. They tried to rush us, but we soon discouraged 'em. I'll take 'em out back, boss, an' get someone to help skin 'em. These pelts are worth money." He clucked to the small roan that was standing quietly between the shafts, and the wagon creaked out of the yard. Teddy turned to his father.

"Dad, Roy and I want to do a little fence riding. There were a few places we missed the last time, and we'll fix 'em now. We may be gone all day. Anything special to do around here?"

"Reckon not, Teddy. Say—" Mr. Manley paused for a moment. "Did you speak to Gus after he got in from town?"

"Yep! About Peterson, you mean? Said no one seemed to know him. But I can tell you one thing—Peterson knows the Lefton brothers."

"The Lefton brothers!" Mr. Manley started. "I thought they'd left the country. A bunch of four-flushers, that's what they are! I didn't take to 'em when I first met 'em. They're not cattle dealers. So Peterson is acquainted with them, hey?" He took his corncob pipe from his pocket and stuck it, unfilled, between his teeth. His eyes narrowed in thought.

"Saw the three of 'em together in Red Rock. They hopped a train just as Roy and I were going to yell at 'em. Still, I suppose there's no harm in that," suggested Teddy.

"No harm, no." Mr. Manley tugged at the ends of his mustache. "Well, go along, Teddy. Stay as long as you want to. Nothing important around here. So he knows the Lefton boys, hey?"

Turning, Mr. Manley walked slowly toward the house. Teddy saw him mount the steps of a small side porch and enter his office. The door slammed shut.

When Teddy rejoined his brother, who was waiting with the two horses, Star and Flash, already saddled, he told him of Nat Raymond's wolf hunt. Then he spoke of their father's behavior on learning of Peterson's friendship with the two Leftons.

"Seemed worried, did he?" Roy asked, and Teddy nodded.

There was no more said for a time, and, mounting, the boys rode out of the yard. After an hour they came in sight of a small herd of cattle—about a hundred—and they loped over.

"See if there are any strays in this bunch," Roy said. "There are a few breaks in the fence, you know. Of course there's no range near us—that is, no range where cattle are grazing, but we'll look, anyway. The best time

## 100 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

to take out strangers is before round-up, not after."

They came closer, and peered at the brands. On every cow there could be plainly seen the X—X.

"Guess these are all right," Teddy commented. "Might as well—"

A peculiar whistle came from the air just above them, and the two boys ducked automatically. At the same instant Teddy's hat flew from his head. He gasped, and put his hand up. Then he looked at the fingers in amazement.

They were smeared with blood!



## CHAPTER XII

### VOICES IN THE NIGHT

TEDDY'S surprise did not prevent him from going into immediate action. He had not been hurt by the bullet, which had been just low enough to draw blood and not stun him. He jumped Flash forward and swung to the left, leaning far over his saddle.

Roy, when he saw that his brother was not injured, followed. But there were no more shots.

On the other side of the herd of cattle they halted. There were a hundred cows between them and the hidden gunman, for the shot could only have come from the one direction. Thus protected, they pulled rein.

"Better slide off," Roy said in a low voice. He dismounted, as did Teddy. "Let's see your head."

Teddy submitted to an inspection.

"Skin's broken, but that's all," Roy pronounced, relief in his voice. "By golly! who in thunder did that?" His anger flared up suddenly. There is a feeling of helplessness about

## 102 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

being shot at from ambush which fills one with a hot rage. "That's the trick of a skunk! Tried to get you from the back! By golly—"

"Well, he missed," Teddy said shortly. His lips were pressed tightly together. His eyes flashed. "If we had guns on I'd like nothing better than to do a little hunting. I know where that shot came from. Some place in that grove of trees."

"What grove? Oh, there?" Roy pointed to a group of trees the tops of which could be seen over the backs of the cattle. Teddy nodded grimly.

"I'd take a bet on it. That's the only place anyone could hide. Say, gun or no gun—"

He rested his hand on the saddle horn and was about to mount when Roy seized him by the arm. With Teddy's just desire for vengeance there had arisen in Roy a more calculating mood, taking the place of his former anger. He was now the steadier of the two.

"We'll do nothing as foolish as that, Teddy," he said quietly. "We wouldn't have the ghost of a chance. If I wanted to remove someone, I'd like nothing better than to have him come for me in the open, unarmed, while I was hidden and had a gun. That's the way our friend will figure. No, not this time. We'd have to ride across that open space to reach the woods, and if there is someone there who wants to see

us pushing up daisies, he'll sure get his wish. We'll have to let him go."

"But—"

"I know. It's tough. But you know we can't do anything. Think it over."

"You mean to say we're going to do nothing—not even find out who fired that shot? Just go away and pretend nothing happened?"

"But, Teddy, what can we do? Now listen. I know how it feels to be shot at. In fact, it may have been me instead of you at whom that bullet was directed. We were pretty close together, you know. Well, it's a nasty sensation, I'll admit. Makes you want to beat up something or other. But look at things calmly. That gunman is over in that grove of trees, you say, and I think you're right. Unless, of course, he ran when he saw that he'd missed. You and I are here without guns. Problem—to get to him without his getting to us. Do you know the answer?"

"Reckon it hasn't any," and Teddy grinned ruefully. "He's got us cold, all right. Though I'd be satisfied to find out who fired that and take my chances of getting him later. However, I can at least get my hat." He mounted, and started to ride back.

"No, you don't, Teddy! That hat is right in line with his fire. No telling how long he'll

## 104 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

wait there, hoping we'll go by again. You let that hat rest awhile."

"And go home without it? Not for a million bucks! If I have to stay here till night I want that hat. These cows look as though they were here for the rest of the day. I'll just stick here, behind 'em, and when it gets dark I'll go after my Stetson."

Roy looked at his brother with an amused smile. This was a new side to Teddy's character, one which he had never seen before. The hat was a small item, yet Roy knew that Teddy meant exactly what he said. He would never leave without that hat.

"Well," Roy laughed dubiously, "if you think that much of it, I guess we'll hang around. As you say, the dogies seem to be pretty well settled, or else they might take a notion to trample that headpiece of yours to dust. We'll wait."

Teddy nodded, as though Roy had said exactly what he had expected him to say. The fact is, it was hard for Roy to understand this mood of his brother's. He thought that by agreeing with him he might discover his purpose in staying. Roy could scarcely believe that Teddy would wait five or six hours simply to recover a hat.

Yet there was no more reason behind Teddy's stubbornness than just this. It relieved him a

great deal to feel that he was not giving in entirely to his hidden enemy—that he was contesting with him the supremacy of the small plot of ground that lay between the cattle and the grove of trees. If Teddy had ridden on without his hat, it would have meant that the gunman was the admitted ruler. Thus the Stetson stood for one of the vital principles of Teddy's life—don't give up in the face of danger.

The two boys picketed their ponies near a bush, and sat down about two hundred yards from the cattle. Now and then a cow would leave the herd and trot toward them, but seeing they made no motion, it would trot back again. There was no danger from these Durhams, even to a man on foot. The sun was too warm, the air too pleasant, to waste energy on the pursuit of human beings.

The cattle moved slowly, when they did move, to find new grazing spots, and the boys had no trouble in keeping behind them. An hour in one place, then a shift, when the ponies were led to the new resting place, and Teddy and Roy again threw themselves on the ground and talked. Roy made no mention of the ridiculous course of conduct they were following. He was wise enough to let a thing rest when he could not understand it.

The hat had fallen quite a distance back, but

Teddy had the spot marked. The day grew colder as the sun approached the horizon. Gradually the mountains took on that blueish tint that heralds the twilight. The moon arose, a pale, washed-out circlet in the azure sky. As the day darkened, the moon became brighter, and when it finally shone, an incandescent orb, Teddy arose. Night had come.

"Now," he said casually, "I'll get my hat."

Roy stared at him curiously.

"Going to ride over or walk?"

"Walk. I know just where it is, and I might miss it on horseback. You stay here and watch the ponies, will you? Too bad we didn't get in any fence repairing, but we can do that to-morrow."

He sauntered off, a strange figure in the moonlight. The cattle were some distance off now, and this was fortunate, for Durhams do not like men on foot near them at night.

Now Teddy was directly in front of the grove of trees, and he halted to gaze at them steadily. If anyone were there, waiting, this should draw the fire. It was not quite so foolhardy a proceeding as it appeared. The light was very poor and the distance too great for accurate shooting. For a moment the boy stood there, then moved on. Not a sound disturbed the stillness of the night. There was no sign of life in the grove of trees.



The hat was lying where it had fallen, near a bush. It looked like a mound of white sand as Teddy approached. He picked it up, dusted it off, felt with his finger the bullet hole, then clapped it on his head and started back. A voice, low, distinct, came to his ears, and he dropped to the ground with the limpness and suddenness of a man whose legs have turned to water.

The voice came from the group of trees. It was hard, as a whiphandle is hard, and was applying itself to the scourging of someone.

"You're still a fool, I see! A skunk I can stand. A fool isn't even worth killin'—his hide's no good. Understand?"

"But Jerry, you told me—"

Jerry! That was it! Jerry Lefton! That's who the speaker was! He and—

"I told you," the voice went on "not to try anything without me or Bill with you! Just because you're known as Mob Jamisson, bad man, you think you can't miss, hey? Well, here's one you missed, and it's going to mean plenty of trouble for us, too! Even if you did plug one of 'em, what about the other? He'd get away sure, an' the fat would be in the fire. It is, anyhow, I guess. They know we're after 'em now. Before they only suspected it. Mob, I could crease you myself for this!"

"Aw, lay off!" The voice was raised in an-

ger. Mob had evidently come to the limit of his endurance. "You'll crease nobody! Get that? An' you won't ball me out no more, either! If there's any creasin' to be done, I'll do it! I'm a partner in this scheme, same as you are. If I got an idea that I think is a good one, I can try it, I reckon."

"You'd better let me or Bill look over your ideas for you," Jerry Lefton said dryly. "If you were alone I wouldn't care what you did. You could hang yourself for all of me. But the way things are fixed now, if the rope goes around your neck it goes around ours too. Me, I don't like that kind of a necktie. You hear me?"

"I hear you," Jamisson growled. "I bungled, I admit it. But I thought I could get that fool easy. Must have been a bum cartridge. Well, the next time you want a thing done you'll do it yourself. I had—"

The voices grew indistinct as the men moved on. An isolated word would come back to Teddy, then the tones ceased altogether. Still the boy lay there, thinking.

"Jerry Lefton and Mob Jamisson," he muttered slowly. "Now we're out in the open. The cards are on the table. He wanted to kill me—and Roy—because we suspect what they are up to. Uh-huh."

He got to his feet and settled the hat more

firmly on his head. Carefully, quietly, he walked back. Roy was waiting for him.

"Got it, hey? Bet you had a hard time to find it. I should have gone to you. Golly, I was afraid you'd got lost!"

"No, I didn't get lost," Teddy answered musingly. "And I didn't have a hard time to find the hat," he added. "I knew just where it was."

"You did? Then what in thunder—"

"Roy, you haven't got a spare badge, have you?"

"Huh? What's that? What kind of a badge?"

"A detective badge." Teddy chuckled. "I just joined your force."

## CHAPTER XIII

### A DOWN-GRADE PROBLEM

LATE as it was when Teddy and Roy Manley reached home that night, a conference was called. Mr. Manley sat in his office, a room set aside for his exclusive use, and listened to Teddy's story, the while he puffed thoughtfully on his corncob pipe and, now and again, tugged at the ends of his mustache. When the tale was finished he clapped his hands together in the manner of a man who has come to a sudden decision.

"Mob Jamisson has attempted to commit murder!" he ejaculated.

Teddy and Roy started. It had not seemed so serious to them. They had not the advantage of Mr. Manley's years in interpreting the occurrence. To them it had merely appeared that a man with a grudge against them had tried to injure them.

"Murder!" Roy repeated slowly. "Sounds nasty, Dad."

Mr. Manley nodded. He picked up the 'phone and called a number at the Hawley exchange.

“Hello—speak to the Sheriff. What? This is Bardwell Manley, at the X Bar X Ranch. Right.”

He waited a moment, evidently while someone was being called to the instrument. Then he said:

“This you, Sheriff? This is Bardwell Manley. X Bar X Ranch. What do you know about a man who goes by the name of Mob Jamisson? Wanted, is he? What for? Yes. . . . Uh-huh. Listen. Add attempted murder to that charge, and see—he tried to kill my boy, Teddy. Shot at him. We have proof all right. And there was another man with him, name of Lefton—Jerry Lefton. Heard of him too, hey? Well, I’d like you to get out warrants for both of them. Soon as possible. That’s it. Let me know if you find ’em. Sure. Thanks. So long!” Mr. Manley hung up the receiver, and faced about.

“That’s the first gun,” he said. “We’ll take no more chances on waddies like that. Makay is a good man. He’ll bring ’em in if they’re still around. Now—” he tapped the ashes from the bowl of his pipe and arose—“the next time you boys go out you wear guns. If Jamisson and his gang have the idea they’re bad men of the West, we’ll just show ’em that the old West isn’t dead yet. Round-up is next week. I don’t want anything to happen, especially

with that big order we got. Six hundred head is a large-size bit."

His face clouded, and the boys waited for him to finish his thought.

"Peterson—he called me up to-day. Wanted to be sure I could make delivery. Never said a word about money, and the market is goin' down every day, too. Way it stands now, he's payin' three a head more than Pete Ball, at the 8 X 8, expects to get. I don't understand it."

"What did he say when he called up?" Roy asked curiously.

"Nothin' much—just asked me how things were comin'. Told him fine. They are, too. I don't want to lose that forfeit. Five hundred isn't exactly pin-money."

"I'll tell a maverick it isn't!" Impressed with the seriousness of this talk, Roy's voice unconsciously assumed a deeper tone.

Mr. Manley, under cover of a cough, looked at his sons. They were growing to manhood quickly, these boys. Their eyes had a steadier light in them, and he noticed how straight they sat, as though they were holding their muscles taut. In the past two years they had gone through many adventures, and had come out of each with an increased feeling of reliance upon themselves. He knew now that it was wise to have allowed them to stop school when they wished. The West had been their school, as it

had been his, and when one graduated from it one was well equipped for the battle of life.

Under his prolonged stare, the boys shifted and looked up inquiringly. Mr. Manley chuckled and rested a hand on a shoulder of each of his sons.

"I was just thinkin', boys, that soon you'll be wantin' to run this ranch yourselves. You can, too. You've grown up, both of you. Grown up into sons I can be proud of." Abruptly his manner changed, and he pulled them toward him affectionately. "Hit the hay now, buckers! You're not too old for me to spank if you stay up too late!" Laughing, he released them. "Up early to-morrow. Plenty to do. Good-night, boys!"

"Good-night, Dad!"

Halfway up the stairs Teddy paused.

"I think," he said slowly, "that dad is a regular fellow. I'd do anything for him."

Roy replied with a single sentence, but so fervent was it that it seemed almost like a prayer:

"I'll tell a maverick he is!"

And they continued to their room.

Early the next day the telephone in Mr. Manley's office rang, and Roy answered it. His father was not in at the moment, and he asked if he could take the message.

"This is Peterson," the voice at the other end



said. "Will you tell your father that I've heard talk of rustlers in this vicinity, and warn him to guard his stock well? I'll tell you now that I'll hold him to that forfeit if he can't deliver, for it means a great deal to me."

"We'll deliver all right," Roy declared. "Don't worry about that. Who told you there were rustlers around?"

"Oh, it's general talk," Peterson said evasively. "Just remember I warned you. Good-bye."

"Wait a—"

There was a click as the other end disconnected, and Roy hung his receiver. He turned to find Teddy watching him.

"More news?"

"You might call it that. Peterson just called up. Told me to tell dad that he's heard there are rustlers around, and to keep track of our stock. Said he'd demand the forfeit if we didn't deliver."

"Huh! Sort of knocks our theory into a cocked hat—about his being in with the Lefton crowd. If he—I mean Peterson—was a rustler, the last thing he'd want to do would be to warn us to watch the cows."

"Yea. Does look like that. Well, I'll tell dad what he said. Coming?"

The two boys walked out of the office and into the yard. When Mr. Manley heard Roy's story

he merely nodded, and gave no thought to Teddy's suggestion that this proved Peterson "was O.K."

"Maybe, an' maybe not," he said, and returned to his work of repairing his saddle. The boys waited for a moment, then wandered off.

"Hard to tell what he does think about it," Roy commented.

"That's a fact. Dad never did much talking. Wonder if the sheriff in Hawley heard anything from Jamisson?"

"Not likely. He'll lay low for a while, I reckon. The skunk! Every time I think of him trying to shoot you in the back—"

"Me, too! You know, I have an idea that your remark of the bullet being meant for you wasn't so far wrong. Here's how I figure: he knew you'd heard them talking that night you went back after your knife. And whatever you heard he didn't want broadcast. Say, that means something else, too! It means that what they said was important! By golly, I just thought of that! Now let's see. We'll work this thing out."

"Good stuff, Teddy. Let's walk over this way." He started for the side porch, and Teddy followed. They sat on the lower step.

"Now, what they said was this," Roy began. "First they said something about six hundred head. That's cattle. Then they mentioned cars,

and an eight mile run, and the old Jarmey place. We heard 'em talk about the Jarmey place when we saw 'em at Red Rock, too."

"Yep. Say, just where is the Jarmey place?"

"I have a rather hazy idea. It's near Red Rock, I know. Suppose we ask Pop?"

Teddy nodded, and arose.

"Think he's around?"

"We can try. Might be near the bunk-house."

They walked over. Pop was cleaning a rifle, and looked up as the two boys approached.

"Mornin', gents. Got an hour to myself, an' I decided to get this here shootin' iron into shape. Set!"

In response to the invitation, the boys squatted on the ground near him.

"Pop," Teddy said, "we want to ask some questions."

Pop removed his hat and scratched his bald head.

"Ain't riddles, are they?"

"Nope. Say, just what do you know about the old Jarmey place?"

"Hum—thought I told you about that once before. Well, it's about four miles from Red Rock. Know where that is, don't you?"

"Sure. We've been there."

"Well, after you leave there you go west, up a steep grade. The Jarmey place is right

on top of a hill, with the tracks runnin' down. Used to be a railroad depot, but it ain't used for nothin' now."

"Can you get to it from Red Rock by following the tracks?"

"Nope. You got to go around Shock Mountain. That's between, an' you can't climb it with a horse. The trail around is about ten or twelve miles long."

"But you said four miles—"

"As the crow flies. Now look. Suppose we start at Eagles." He laid his rifle down carefully, and with his forefinger drew a map in the dust. "This here is Eagles. The main line comes in this way—you know that part of it. Now, there's a pair of tracks that run from Eagles to Red Rock, on a branch. They ain't used no more, since the main line came in. Eagles is pretty high up, you know—higher'n Red Rock. The branch that runs to Red Rock starts a little above Eagles. Well, you follow these tracks down to Red Rock. Then they dip pretty sharp an' curve, an' four miles farther come into the Jarmey station. I think they run about eight miles beyond this, then peter out near Hawley. At least, that's my recollection of it.

"Then, practically speaking, it's down grade all the way from Eagles to where that branch railroad ends?"

"Uh-huh. That's one of the reasons they had to make a new railroad—the engines couldn't pull cattle cars up the hills."

"Are there any cars on the siding now?"

"You mean down at the Jarmey place?"

"Well, either there or above Eagles."

"Can't say for certain. Might be. More chance of 'em bein' above Eagles than down at the other end. But if there are any, I wouldn't want to ride in 'em."

"Think the tracks are still there, all the way to Red Rock?"

"Sure, an' some distance beyond. There ain't never been nobody with enough gumption to root 'em up, so I reckon they'll stay there till they rust to pieces."

"How far is it from Red Rock to where the tracks end?"

"Eight miles, didn't you say, Pop?" Teddy broke in.

"About that. Why, thinkin' of buyin' the shebang?"

"Not any," Roy laughed. "Eight miles!" He thought for a moment. "And all down grade?"

"Yep. Reckon you could coast a bicycle all the way down, if you was so minded. Or sky, for that matter."

"Sky?"

"Sure! Ever hear of that? You put two

barrel staves on your feet and use 'em like skates. Course there has to be snow on the ground."

"Oh, I see," Teddy said, and turned his head away to hide his smiles. "Well, that's all, I guess. Thanks for the information, Pop."

"Welcome. Any time at all. Glad to oblige." He picked up his rifle again. "Still practicin' for the rodeo?"

"Haven't to-day," Roy answered. "Suppose we try a little, Teddy? Let's see what we can do with the pony express."

"All right. I was thinking we might—But never mind. Sure, we'll practice some."

"Like to watch you, boys, but I got to ride out in a few minutes. Usin' Star an' Flash, I suppose?"

"Sure are! Well, see you later."

Pop nodded, and they left him to his labors.

"Eight miles, and all down grade," Roy mused. "Those words seem familiar, Teddy?"

"They do, sonny; they do! That was the song Mob Jamisson was singing, with the Lefton brothers, tenors, joining in the chorus. Wonder when they go into their dance?"

"You think they will, then?"

"Every good team does a song and dance. Unless they get the hook first. You and I, Roy, will try to be the so-called hook."

## 120 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

"Uh-huh. Bofore they get to the dance. But I'd like to know just what kind of a dance they're best at, and where it'll be staged. It'll be our job to find out."

"Right! We'll keep our eyes peeled, lest we get our knuckles skinned. Now let's try this pony express stuff."

They had come to the corral, wherein were Star and Flash, and they soon had the horses saddled.

"Pony express" is the art of quick dismounting and mounting, as practiced by the mail riders in the days of Wild Bill Hickock. A man dashes up, throws himself from his bronco, transfers his mailbag to another and fresher mount, and dashes away again with the loss of as few seconds as possible. It calls into action all the expertness a rider possesses. A single slip means ill-afforded delay.

Nick Looker was called upon to help, since he was idle at the moment, and he saddled the bronco that Teddy had lately broken. The start was at the extreme end of the yard, the first change half way across, and another change at the end, when the rider would swing back over his route.

"You go first, Teddy," said Roy.

"All right; it's all one, I suppose," was Teddy's reply.

He mounted Flash, and was in readiness for



the signal. At some distance Roy waited with Star, and farther on still was Nick with the other bronco, which they decided to call, sarcastically, Angelica.

"All set?" Teddy called.

"O.K. here!" was Roy's answer. "How about you, Nick?"

"Ri-i-i-ight!"

Roy looked at his wrist watch. When the minute hand pointed to zero he yelled:

"Go!"

Teddy bent low, and Flash leaped forward. Across the yard the pony tore, his feet lost in the haze of dust. Ears laid back, fine head thrust forward, he made a wonderfully pretty sight. Teddy sat on him as though he were a part of the horse, riding beautifully. Straight for Roy and the waiting Star he dashed.

Reaching him, the boy fairly flew from the saddle before Flash had fully hated. Springing the short distance separating him from Roy, he bounded into the saddle again, and in a second had Star racing toward Nick at full speed. The change had been made with scarcely a moment's delay.

But as Star hurtled for Angelica, the new pony shied and pulled away from Nick, who had relaxed his hand in his excitement at Teddy's riding ability. Thus, when the boy jumped off, there was no horse there to receive

him. It took precious seconds to catch the pony, and when Teddy pulled up, panting, at the end of the run, Roy looked up from gazing at his watch.

“Two-fifty-six. Not so bad. Would have been much better if Nick hadn’t let go Angelica. But you have to expect those accidents. We’ll try again later. Say, here comes Gus, and he’s got a grin on him a mile wide. Wonder what’s up?”

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE CRYSTAL GAZER

THAT Gus Tripp was the bearer of news was easy to be seen. It fairly oozed from him, and he had a hard time to keep from shouting it as he approached. But he managed to contain himself, and when he came closer he asked:

“You fellers busy just now?”

“Well, not so very,” Teddy replied. “You look as though you had something to say. Go ahead, spill it!”

“Sure I ain’t interruptin’?”

“No, no! For Pete’s sake, get it out of yore system!” Nick chuckled. “You’ll bust in another minute. What’s the joke?”

“There’s a medium down at the bunkhouse!”

“What’s that?”

“Huh? Say it again, an’ say it slow. What’s down at the bunkhouse?”

“A medium!”

“Medium what?”

“Medium nothin’—just a medium! A guy what tells the future!”

Light dawned slowly.

"You mean a fortune-teller!" Roy exclaimed.  
 "That it?"

"Uh-huh. Say, he's a pip! You ought to see him! Got a funny thing around his head. Rode up in a little buckboard. Talks some funny kind of language. He's waitin' down there now. Wish my wife was here, 'stead of in the city. She loves that stuff. She's mostly Mexican, you know. Come on down!"

"Where did you say he was?"

"Waitin' near the bunkhouse. Golly, I wish Pop was here—an' Bug Eye! We could sure have some fun! Pop just pulled out as this gink came in."

"Wait till we put these brones up, and we'll be with you."

"All right; but hurry along."

The horses were tied to the hitching-rail, and the four punchers walked toward the bunkhouse, led by Gus. He was greatly delighted with the new experience of meeting a medium. Chances for entertainment are few and far between on Western ranches, and when it comes the buckers make the most of it.

"There he is! See him?" Gus whispered in a thrilled tone, pointing. "Snakes, ain't he a beaut!"

And indeed he was a "beaut."

Seated on the ground near the door of the bunkhouse, legs curled up out of sight under

him, was a strange figure. A bright blue fez crowned a dark, swarthy countenance. A long, flowing robe of green and yellow enveloped him. A vivid red sash was wound several times about his waist, giving him the appearance of a bag of potatoes—but a bag of such colors as was never seen in that part of the world. Close to him was the buckboard, a forlorn donkey standing dejectedly between the shafts.

Catching sight of the four men, the medium arose smoothly, like a snake unwinding, and, spreading his hands wide, he bowed.

“Come in, come in, gent’men,” he droned in a low monotone. “I wait for you.”

“Come in where?” Nick asked blankly.

“What matter? Into my fold. I see before me—” he paused.

“What do you see before you?” Gus inquired curiously.

“That I weesh to know,” and the medium smiled blandly. “You mus’ tell me, no?”

“I don’t exactly get—” Nick began, when Teddy interrupted.

“He wants to know who we are. This is Nick Looker, and this is Gus Tripp. The gentleman there is my brother, Roy Manley. I’m Teddy Manley. This is our ranch, the X Bar X. That do you?”

“Please no get angry,” the man pleaded, and smiled again, sensing a slight antagonism in

Teddy's voice. "I mean no harm. I help you. I tell you—" He looked up at the sky, and waved his arms. "I tell you everything! What has been, what is to be! Nothing is hidden! You listen, no?" His voice dropped suddenly, leaving him gazing eagerly forward.

"Well, maybe," Roy answered, not wishing to commit himself. "How much?"

"That—the gold—I care not for. It is for the happiness of you that I tell, young man. But—we must live. Shall we say five dollars—each one?"

"We shall not," Teddy said. "That's too much. Two dollars apiece."

"Three dollars?"

"Two, I said."

The man bowed.

"You know best. It is not good that we become greedy for gold. For two dollars I will give you a life reading."

"What's that?" Gus demanded, watching the man with a fascinated stare.

"It is the telling of your life—what has been, what is to be. I do it thus."

From the folds of his robe the man produced a crystal globe with such suddenness that Nick unconsciously dodged. The East Indian, if such he was, smiled.

"You think I hurt you, no? You think I have about me a corbra or a broomslange, no? That

is foolishment. I am no cheat. I do not deal in trickery. I am a true fakir."

"Yo're a faker, an' you admit it?" Nick asked, with surprise in his voice. "How do you expect—"

"Not faker, *fakir*," the man corrected gently. "My name is Mohammed Ali Ben Suliman, by which you may know that I am of the true faith."

"Seems like a sincere little cuss," Roy said in an aside to Teddy. "Probably has a hard time of it out here. What say we give him two bucks and let him do his stuff?"

"Sure! Suits me. It'll be fun, anyhow." He turned to Mohammed. "Where do you do this crystal-gazing?"

"Any place where I and my friend can be alone." The blue eyes twinkled for a moment. "If you are afraid, young man,—"

"Afraid of what?" Gus asked wonderingly and truculently.

"Of what I shall tell you."

"Guess that needn't worry us," Nick snickered. "Go ahead, boy; we'll stand for anything!"

"Yes?" the little man smiled again, inscrutably. "I wish for you a good fortune. Who will be the first?"

"You, Nick," Gus whispered. "See what he says. Go on."



## 128 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

"Naw, you try it first. You found him. Or maybe Roy or Teddy—"

"We're in no hurry," Roy declared, grinning. "You can have the freedom of the bunkhouse."

"Bunkhouse? What is that?" Mohammed asked curiously.

Roy pointed. "In there. Where the boys sleep. That all right?"

The mystic bowed. "What you say. We shall go into the bunkhouse."

"Good name for it," Teddy chuckled, but not so Mohammed could hear him. He had no wish to offend the man, who appeared slightly frightened and not at all assertive. He kept eyeing the guns the boys, in obedience to the command of their father, had by their sides.

"Well, I'll go first," Gus declared at last. "Can't Nick come in with me?"

"I do not like it," Mohammed said dubiously. "wishes, anyone can listen."

"Then we can all go in!" said Gus, and Teddy fancied his voice expressed relief. "I Better alone. But it can be done. If the man don't care who hears my future. The past—well, let 'er come. Reckon I can stand that, too."

"If you will go first—" and Mohammed made a motion with his slim, nervous hand. "I shall follow."

Gus entered, and Mohammed walked slowly

behind him. Teddy asked him if it was all right to leave the donkey.

"Stamboul will stand for days," the little man declared solemnly. "He has the true gift of patience. I have taught him."

Once within the bunkhouse, he looked about him eagerly.

"You sleep here?"

"Sure do," Nick replied. "All of us. Good, too. Why?"

"Nothing," and Mohammed sighed. "Under these so blue skys, I myself would live. No roof would cover me. Still—"

"Not in the winter you wouldn't," Gus chuckled. "Gets thirty below out here."

Mohammed nodded absently. It is doubtful if he understood.

"I use the table, yes?" he asked, after a moment.

"Sure. Go to it," Roy agreed. "Here's a chair." He pulled one up. "Take a seat."

"Take a—ah, yes. Now young man," he looked at Gus. "If you will be across from me—"

Gus, a trifle nervously, seated himself on the other side of the table.

"Not goin' to hypnotize, are you?" he asked, with an attempt at humor. "We had a feller do that once. He didn't make out so well."

"I do not do thus," Mohammed answered

## 130 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

seriously. "That is black magic. I am afraid for that. Now you will give me your hand, please?"

Gus forced a smile, and stretched out his hand limply. Mohammed grasped it.

"Tight, please. That is it. Now for a moment, quiet. You will make a wish. When you have made it, say 'yes'."

## CHAPTER XV

### MYSTERIOUS DANGER

THERE was a moment's silence, while Gus essayed a grin which failed to live up to his expectations. The brown face across the table was too much in earnest, too sincere, to allow for any levity. Then, in a low voice, Gus said:

"Yes."

"Very well. It is not for me to say what your wish is. You know that. Later, I shall say if it will occur. Now, please look at me."

Gus stared across the table like a bird looking into the eyes of a cat. Suddenly he flushed, and shifted his eyes. The brown man smiled.

"It is not so hard, is it?"

"Huh? Oh, you got that, hey? I was afraid—"

"You were afraid I was trying to hold your eyes, and you moved them to find out. Is that not so?"

"That's right," Gus admitted uneasily.

"He's clever!" Roy whispered to Teddy, in admiration. "Bet he knows a lot about psychology."

## 132 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

If Mohammed heard him, he made no sign.

"There are many things I see for you," he said slowly, "many, many things. Some good, some bad. First I shall tell you of what you have been. You were born in a very hot country, no?"

"Uh-huh. On the border," Gus admitted laconically.

"I know not that place. But I see that you have the nature of the south. Slow, gentle, kind. I, myself, have that nature. You do not like excitement."

"Nor work," Nick added, *sotto voce*.

"What? No, young man, that is not so. This man is not lazy. He goes carefully, that is all. He like not to jump into things. And that is good. One thing I sorry for. You have not music in your life, as you should."

"Huh? I can't play nothin'."

"I not understand what you say, 'play.' I tell you that you should have music, and you have not. Too bad. You have the soul for it. Now, you are married, no?"

"Yep."

"Your wife, she, I think, is from hot country. That kind of girl go with your nature. Some time, I think before you marry, you have trouble with this girl—you not be so sure of her. I see you unhappy for a time. Is that true?"

"That's true," Gus answered. He looked up

at Roy. The boy was observing Mohammed intently.

"You would like to know something of the future?"

"Go ahead."

"Eleven months from now you will be most un-happy. I cannot say why, but I see it for you. That will pass. You must remember that it will pass. You will never be much rich. But you will have that which is better than riches—health and love. Your life will be long. Never shall you cross great water. The big world shall not know of you, but along your path those friends you have will honor you. Should you have music into your life, it will help you to happiness. And you will some day be a fine, wonderful musician if you allow the music to enter. Still your path is not into the cities, but through fields. Your music will be for your friends, not for the world. There will be one who will know how great a musician you could become. That is your wife." He paused, and put a hand to his head. "That—is all."

Gus sat quietly, staring down at the table. The thoughts that were running through his head showed in his face—wonderment at the brown man's powers of divination, memories of what had happened so long ago in Vegas. Suddenly he grinned, and looked up.

## 134 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

"You sure hit 'em right, Mo! Say, can I ask you any questions?"

"As much as you will."

"Well, have I got anyone who's lookin' to do me dirt?"

"What? I cannot see this, what you mean 'dirt'."

"He means any enemies," Teddy explained.

"Enemies! Now listen. In this room I feel that all are friends—good friends. Yet there is something that trys to get in—someone who is an enemy to all here. Yes, young man, you have an enemy, but not of yourself—he is enemy because of what you are, not because who your are."

"Yea. Maybe. But I don't get what you—"

"You mean that someone is his enemy because he is a friend of ours?" Roy asked bluntly.

"That is it, young man," Mohammed answered, not at all dismayed. "You, all of you, have those who wish you not well. They seek to harm you."

"An' will they?" Nick demanded, leaning forward.

Mohammed kept silence for a moment, then spoke, slowly:

"That, friend, is in the laps of the gods. I may not tell you of it. Please, you will excuse now?" He smiled appealingly.



"Sure! You earned your money," Teddy said quickly. "If you'll do a trick for us, we'll give you five bucks—together. How about it?"

"Trick? Perhaps." He gazed long at Teddy, then nodded, as though the boy had told him something. Later Teddy explained that he wanted Gus to forget what he had been told, and to get his mind on other things Teddy had suggested the trick. The brown man realized his purpose without knowing the reason, and consented to work "magic" for them.

They leaned forward eagerly as the mystic took from the folds of his robe a small flower pot. The thoughtful expression left Gus's face and he grinned happily.

"Gee, I allus wanted to see this!" he exclaimed. "You gonna make a plant grow, ain't you?"

Mohammed nodded and smiled.

"I shall do an attempt," he said. "Not always succeed. Watch, please."

Over the pot he waved his hands, intoning, the while, words in a strange language, the only expression of which Teddy was sure was "*Allah Akbar*." Then, before the astonished gaze of his audience, a stem pushed its way through the earth. Higher and higher it grew, while they watched, and then tiny oranges came into being. Leaves sprouted. The plant flourished, and a faint, sweet perfume came from it.

"Golly!" Nick breathed. "She's growin'!"

At a height of about five inches the development stopped. Mohammed dropped his hands, and bowed.

"It is finished," he said simply. "Take and eat this."

He pulled an orange off and handed it to Roy, who broke it open. The fruit inside was fresh and fragrant.

"Can we have the tree?" he asked.

Mohammed shook his head.

"So sorry—that I must keep. See—"

He waved his hands again, and the tree shrank. Smaller and smaller it grew, until finally it disappeared altogether. Then he seized the pot and concealed it once more beneath his robe.

"Great!" Gus cried enthusiastically. "Good stuff, Mo! Golly, I wish I could learn that! Here's my two bucks. It sure was worth it."

"Save it, Gus," Roy said, and handed Mohammed a five dollar bill. The brown man pocketed it casually. "Thank you," he said.

"Where you goin' from here?" Nick inquired.

The shoulders shrugged. "Who knows? I shall travel with Stamboul. Once more, I thank you." He bowed low, and walked toward the door.

"Mind if my brother and I ride a way with you?" Roy asked suddenly.

Mohammed gazed at him in surprise.

"If you so wish," he said finally. "We follow no path, Stamboul and I. You are welcome."

Teddy, at a motion from his brother, ran toward the hitching-rail and returned with Star and Flash. They mounted while the brown man seated himself in his wagon.

"So long, Mo!" Nick called. "Good luck!"

Mohammed smiled his answer and picked up the reins. Stamboul came to life wearily, and moved off. Teddy and Roy followed at a short distance behind.

"Don't say anything for a while," Roy whispered. "Not till we get a way out."

Mohammed Ali Ben Suliman sat upright, his long robe trailing over the edge of the wagon. Stamboul walked on, and when the mystic had passed over a little hill, out of sight of the ranch, he turned.

"Looks kind of like rain, doesn't it?" he called, every trace of his accent gone.

Teddy started. Roy smiled.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE START OF THE ROUND-UP

"SURE does," Roy answered Mohammed Ali Ben Suliman's question casually. He saw that Teddy was about to speak, and silenced him with a glance. Both boys urged their ponies forward until they were close to the man in the buckboard.

"Mind telling us your real name?" Roy asked pleasantly.

"Who, me? Not at all." The man drew his fez from his head, reached into his robes, and filled and lit a pipe before answering. "I can't take these robes off," he apologized. "It'd scare the donkey if he turned around. My name is Benjamin Sullivan. I'm a professor of psychology in the university of Middleton. That, in case you don't know it, which you don't, is what is known as a jerk-water college."

"A professor of psychology!" Teddy exclaimed. "Then you're not—"

"Hardly," and the professor grinned. "This is what I do every vacation. It—er—adds to my income—" he coughed—"and also to my

knowledge. It's wonderful practice for a psychologist. Say, would you mind telling me how you got on to me?" he asked Roy. "I knew you realized I wasn't what I pretended to be when you were watching me at the table."

"Well, there wasn't any psychology about that," Roy chuckled. "When you drew your robes back to get the flower pot I saw the pipe sticking out of your top pocket. Never heard of an East Indian yet who smoked a briar."

"You saw that, did you? I'll have to remember to put it in my trousers' pocket after this. Get along there, Stamboul. Then you rode out with me just to let me know I hadn't gotten away with anything?"

"Not altogether," Roy answered seriously. "You mentioned something about our enemies. Was that a stab in the dark, or did you really know what you were talking about?"

Professor Sullivan puffed silently for a moment.

"Well, I'll tell you," he said finally. "Last night I was traveling through a small town about ten miles from here. Let's see—Bed Rock, or something like that."

"Red Rock!" Teddy exclaimed eagerly.

"Red Rock—that's it. Just outside of the town I came upon a campfire. I was hungry, so I stopped. There were four men there. One was tall, and had a wart on his nose. Another

was much shorter. The other two I didn't get a very good look at. Well, I pretended not to understand much English, and offered to tell their fortunes for a meal. They accepted. I didn't like the looks of any of them, and concluded that none of them made his living by hard work. So I took a chance, and told them that pretty soon they were going to receive some property or goods that they would get for nothing."

"What did they say then?" Roy demanded.

"Nothing. But they looked enough. I followed this lead, and I could tell every time I hit it right by the way they acted. Then one of them whispered to another. They didn't think I heard, but I did."

"What was it they whispered?"

"It was this: 'Sounds like he knows we got that Manley bunch sewed up cold.'"

Teddy whistled, long and low. Roy's face was alight with interest.

"Anything else? Do you know who we are?"

"The last question first. Yes, I do. You told me. No, that's all I heard."

"It was plenty!" Teddy said grimly. "Golly, Professor, you sure had me fooled! They think they've got us sewed up, do they?" His mind, youthful, jumped from one topic to another.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Sullivan, we'll leave you here," Roy said suddenly. "Thanks very

much for your information. And—good luck.”

“Same to you,” Professor Sullivan returned graciously. “If I hear anything else I’ll try to let you know. I take it those men I met last night aren’t friends of yours?”

“Not so you could notice it,” Teddy replied. “The fact is, we think they’re rustlers.”

“Hum! I suspected as much. Well, it takes all sorts to make up a world, you know. Good-bye, boys. Giddap, Stamboul!”

“So long!”

Teddy and Roy turned, and started for the ranch. They got one last sight of the professor before he disappeared into a valley. He had replaced his fez, and the smoke from his pipe drifted about him like a mystic haze. The wagon creaked, bounced over a stone, and was out of sight.

“Professor of psychology!” Teddy said thoughtfully. “Can you beat that!”

“Funny cuss, isn’t he?” Roy remarked. “Clever as they come. Look how he spotted Gus. Say, I wonder who that fourth man at the Lefton camp was? I suppose you recognized his description of the Lefton boys?”

“Sure did. Reckon Mob Jamisson was there. As to the fourth—Peterson, do you think?”

“I was going to mention that. Doesn’t seem likely, though, after his warning us against rustlers. But you can’t always tell. Gee, I’ll be



## 142 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

glad when round-up is over and we get the cattle safe in Red Rock.”

“Same here. Shall we tell the boys who Mohammed was?”

“No, let’s not. They got a lot of fun out of it, and why spoil it? Chances are they wouldn’t believe us, anyhow. He sure did look the part. Well, Teddy, my boy, in three days the real work starts. We’ll have to let our rodeo practice go for a while, I guess. Dad is going to need all our time for the round-up. Need everybody, if the Lefton’s start anything. Well, let ’em come. I’d like to see Mob Jamisson for a few minutes, myself.”

The three days that followed were busy ones. There was much outriding to be done. to insure the condition of the cattle and to make certain that none of them had been rustled. A close guard was kept, and the two boys had their share of this dreary work. All cattle that showed any signs of disease were thoroughly inspected and cut from the herd. There were many ponies to be shod, for when out on the round-up there was no time to stop and lead in a bronco that had cast a shoe and was splitting its hoof against the hard earth. Flash and Star stood quietly while this disturbing operation was accomplished, but some of the other ponies, notably Angelica, were not so well mannered.

In the hustle of preparation the Lefton brothers and Mob Jamisson were almost forgotten.

Almost, but not quite. Peterson visited the ranch on the evening before the round-up, and again remarked that he had heard of rustlers in the vicinity.

"Don't forget that forfeit," he added meaningly. "Going to be able to get the six hundred head to Red Rock on time?"

"Why not?" Mr. Manley countered. "If you and your playmates—"

He did not finish the sentence, not wishing to antagonize the man. But when Peterson left, Mr. Manley confessed to Roy that if his price had not been met so quickly he would have told Peterson the deal was off.

"Can't quite afford to let this chance slip," he said regretfully. "Even if, as you say, Peterson knows the Lefton boys an' maybe is a rustler himself. I sure wish his boss would deal direct with me. Peterson showed me a letter from Chicago, with the name of a well-known firm on top, addresed to him, so I guess he's reliable enough. But, somehow, I don't take to him—always got an idea that he's out to cheat us if he can. Suppose it's only my imagination, though."

As the ranch sought its rest that night, Mr. Manley declared that he was satisfied with the

## 144 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

preparations. The morrow would see the start of the round-up, and the punchers went to their bunks early. A round-up, while savoring of the romance of the West, is actually just another bit of distasteful work heaped on the already overloaded shoulders of the poor cowboy—at least, according to him. But it is necessary, and the punchers know it.

The reason for a round-up is not, contrary to fiction, for the purpose of allowing the buckers an opportunity of showing off their riding ability and giving them a chance to shoot and yell. It is the only method there is to herd all the animals of a particular ranch to one spot, for the purpose of checking them, removing the cattle which do not belong where found to their proper ranges, and sorting out those to be sold.

It is tiresome work, replete with danger, and everyone is glad when it is over.

The corrals used by the X Bar X for the round-up were far distant from the ranch house. They had been repaired in anticipation of the huge herds of cattle they must soon accommodate, and at the first streak of dawn the chuck wagon under the guidance of Sing Lung, started its creaking journey toward the point of deployment. This wagon was a traveling kitchen, for during round-up time the boys ate and slept on the range.

The extra saddle ponies were driven out, in

charge of Pop Burns and Gus. They were to be held in reserve until a puncher needed a fresh bronco, for the work was of such a laborious nature that frequent changes of mounts were necessary. Every horse, except the ones to be ridden by the punchers, was sent after the chuck wagon.

With the home corral empty, the ranch took on a deserted appearance. And at six o'clock Teddy, Roy, Mr. Manley and the punchers started for the range.

The round-up was under way.

## CHAPTER XVII

### DRIVING IN

STRAIGHT toward the rising sun the herders rode. The corral, within which the cattle were to be driven, was about seven miles out, and they were to go there and get their instructions from Mr. Manley.

There were eight riders in the group, led by Teddy, Roy and their father. The others were trailing along behind. In the extreme rear rode Nick Looker and Jules Kolto.

"Peach of a day," Teddy remarked. "Thought sure we'd have rain—always does pour when you don't want it to."

"Teddy, you and Roy are going to be round-up bosses," Mr. Manley stated. "I reckon you knew that, anyway. Roy, you'd better put a good tally-man on the job. I want to know just how many, if any, we're shy since the spring."

"Right, Dad. Now about the six hundred we're bringing to Red Rock? Want them herded into the corral first?"

"No, I reckon not. Only waste time that-away. There's a bunch of dogies far down on the

southwest corner—or they were the last I heard—that I'm countin' on for that herd. Best and fattest of the lot. How many men do you want with you?"

"You mean to get that bunch together and drive 'em to Red Rock?"

"Yep."

"Well, what do you think, Teddy? Suppose we take Nick, Gus and Pop. Or do you want them to—"

"Nope—you can have 'em. These boys back there all know their business." He motioned with his head to those following. "But we won't start the drive until to-morrow. I want to get the rest together—as many as I can—first."

They rode on quietly for some little while, each man busy with his own thoughts. The day was perfect—bright, with the tang of coming winter in the air. Everything seemed to be going perfectly—too perfectly, Roy thought, to last. There came vividly to him the memory of Professor Sullivan and of what the professor had heard the Leftons say: "—got 'em sewed up cold." For all the beauty of the tall, imposing mountains surrounding them and the deep blue sky overhead, Roy found it hard to shake off a feeling of uneasiness. It appeared to him like the calm before a storm.

He did not confide his fears to his father, how-

## 148 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

ever, for he realized that they were based on mere suspicion.

"Trouble with me is, I think too much," he said grimly to himself. "Chances are the Leftons and Mob Jamisson aren't within miles of this place. Keeping out of sight of the sheriff, most likely. But if they wanted to, they sure could cause us plenty of trouble now."

This was no more than the truth. Anything can happen in round-up time, and it does not take much to cause it to happen.

"Have to forget that stuff," Roy thought, and chuckled. Teddy looked over at him.

"Joke?" he asked.

"No—just ideas. Hope Sing Lung has got some grub rustled for us when we get there. I'm hungry."

"What, again? Better save it till dinner. It's a long time between meals out here. Well, a mile more, and we'll arrive."

"Um, arrive. That's a good word, too. Much more elegant than saying we'll be there."

Teddy bowed mockingly, though it failed to impress Roy because Flash stepped into a badger hole at the moment and interrupted the gesture.

"Nell likes big words, you know," he said loftily, when he had straightened out the pony. "You should practice up a bit."



"Counting on Curley coming to the rodeo?" Roy asked innocently.

"What for—to see me fall off? Hope not."

"Yes-s-s-s, you hope not! Hear that, Dad? He doesn't want Curley to see him in the rodeo!"

"That so, Son?" Mr. Manley said, grinning. "You've got to have someone to hand the first prize to. Might as well be Ethel."

"That doesn't worry me," Teddy laughed. "All the first prizes I get I'll carry home in a handkerchief."

They now came in sight of the corral, or rather the corral they were to use as a base. The chuck wagon was already there, with smoke pouring out of the stack.

"We eat, boys!" Mr. Manley called to those following. The breakfast at the ranch house had been a sketchy affair, and he felt, wisely, that a good meal would do more than anything else to urge the punchers on to their labors.

As the riders spurred their horses forward, Sing Lung appeared at the door of the chuck wagon.

"Come gettee!" he yelled.

"An' we will, brother—we will!" Nat Raymond shouted.

The men dismounted, and, picketing their horses, crowded around the wagon. They realized that this was to be their last meal for a

## 150 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

good many hours, and they were going to make the most of it.

“What is it, Sing—stew?”

“Bet it’s bean soup!”

“Naw, he’s got strawberry short-cake for us! See the strawberries?”

“They ain’t strawberries—that’s his checkered shirt, stupid!”

When the meal was dished out, it proved to be some concoction of veal and bread dressing. At least it was popular, and many of the riders clamored for “more!”

This second breakfast was concluded, and the men gathered about Mr. Manley for instructions. It was now eight o’clock, with the sun fully up. A fresh breeze blew from the east, causing the ponies to sniff loudly and joyfully. They, too, were impatient to begin.

The corral they were to use as the base of operations was about an eighth of a mile from the chuck wagon. This corral was connected to several smaller ones by a system of gates, so that the main herd could be driven in and then separated and sorted into their respective enclosures.

“Well, boys, here’s the program.” Mr. Manley said. “You can all hear me, can’t you?”

“Yep!”

“Go ahead, boss!”

“I’ve got a deal on for six hundred head of

cattle. Suppose you all know that. It's important that these cattle be up to expectations, and also that they get to Red Rock on time—for certain reasons."

He paused, and glanced around him. The punchers were listening intently.

"We've had a bit of trouble with two or three waddies who haven't any love for this outfit," he continued slowly. "I'm not mentioning any names. You can guess them, I reckon. And if they aim to make trouble, we'll have to give 'em as good as they send. Get me?"

"Sure thing, boss!"

"All right. I'm just tellin' you to watch your step. Now I guess that's settled." He drew a deep breath. "Teddy and Roy here are the round-up bosses. If you want instructions an' I'm not around, you go to them. One man has got to stay near this here wagon, to watch the extra horses. That'll be you, Joe." He nodded to a small man who was leaning against the wheel.

"Right, boss! I get'cha."

"The rest of us will start on the herd in the northern corner of the range. We'll ride out from here, and circle every cow we see toward this corral. The bunch that goes to Red Rock is in the southwest part, an' we won't hit them to-day. Everything understood?"

"O.K!"

## 152 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

"Then let's go. Joe, you stick around here. 'Bout two o'clock remind Sing Lung that grub will be appreciated. Come on, you buckers!"

There was a rush for horses. Each man vaulted into his saddle and swung his steed about. Hats were raised high into the air and brought down sharply on the ponies' flanks. Spurs were brought into play.

"Let's go-o-o-o-o!"

"Yip-yip-yipe-e-e-e-e!"

Like children on a holiday, they started. The harder a piece of work to be done the more ceremonious is the beginning. And a round-up occurs only twice a year.

Out across the range they rode, Mr. Manley leading, Teddy and Roy following close behind. After the first burst of speed they quieted down, for the energies of the ponies had to be conserved.

Mile after mile they traveled. By ten-thirty they reached the spot they were to begin circling from—a small knoll at the extreme edge of the Manley range. On their way they had passed many herds of cattle, some numbering no more than fifty, some containing two hundred head. All these had to be gathered together and driven into the base corral.

At a signal from Mr. Manley, the men separated, forming themselves in a long skirmish line. This line was converged at each end, to

make a semicircle. So widely apart were the riders that they stretched over nearly two miles of territory.

Teddy was on one end, Roy on the other, and their father was the center man. Slowly they started, each man keeping his distance, none getting ahead of the others. Everything that ran on four legs was to be driven in by the advancing line.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### TEDDY GETS HIS ORDERS

As the men rode forward, a small herd, some seventy-five or a hundred head, which was grazing quietly in a shallow valley, looked up inquisitively. The horsemen did not quicken their pace, but proceeded calmly toward the cows.

"Mostly yearlings," Roy called to Nick, who was next to him in line. "Yearling" is the term used by the cowboy to denote an animal two or three years old, and intended for food rather than for breeding.

Now the advancing line came to the cows. A few men let out their "yip-yip-yip-eee!" and the herd, aroused, quitted their grazing ground and trotted forward, in the same direction, of course, as the men were headed. These were the first of the round-up, and formed the base of what was later to become a huge parade of animals.

These ranges were all fenced in, and hence the round-up was not so difficult as it would have been if the cattle had to be driven in from open prairie. Yet the fenced territory was so large that for many purposes it was still un-

protected range. Perhaps there was fifty or seventy-five miles of fence surrounding the Manley lands. Necessarily there were many breaks in this long stretch, through which animals from other ranges might stray, as well as antelopes and deer. These mixed with the stock and had to be weeded out, and a round-up was the weeding machine.

The riders walked their horses onward, keeping a constant pace, and the cattle finally adjusted themselves to this speed and went forward resignedly. On the far end of the line, where Teddy rode, another herd was picked up. These, seeing their brethren in the distance, went to meet them, and the two herds were merged into one, near the center of the line.

Now Mr. Manley left his place, motioning to those on each side of him to close up and fill the gap. He circled around until he came out in front of the walking cattle. From now on the riders were to take their pace from him.

Everything was done quietly and in orderly fashion. The men were silent for the most part, keeping their ponies to a steady walk and watching for a break in the bunch of cows. It came when they encountered the third herd.

Teddy, on one end, and Roy, on the other, had moved up until they were riding opposite



the two sides of the herd. Suddenly Teddy saw a beast leave his companions and cut out diagonally across his line of march. He waited, rather hoping the steer would depart quietly, and willing to let him go rather than create a panic by forcing him back. But another beef followed, and another, until twenty-five or thirty were running wild.

The time had come for action. Unless they were brought quickly back, the whole herd might break, and the round-up would have to be started anew. Teddy yelled to Gus.

“Circle ’em in! Come up—come up!”

He dashed forward, Gus behind him. They swept about on the outside of the running cattle.

“Get in there, you crazy loons!” Teddy shouted. “Back you go! Take ’em back, Flash!”

At the sight of two forms flanking them in whirlwinds of dust, the cattle hesitated, stopped, and gave ponderous thought to the situation. Why were they breaking out of line? It was much easier to rejoin their plodding mates. And then, all thought of flight disappearing, they turned, pawed the earth for a moment, and trotted back into the herd. Teddy breathed a sigh of relief.

“Had plenty luck then, Gus!”

“I’ll say! Thought we had a job on our hands. Those fool cattle were achin’ to start

somehin'. We cured 'em, though. Whew! Some hot!"

Wiping his face with his sleeve, he pulled his neckerchief up until it covered his mouth and nose, thus to protect him from the heavy dust. Teddy also had his face thus covered, as did the other riders. This is the true reason for the cowboy's red bandanna, worn, except on occasions like this, loosely about his neck.

Once more the line moved forward. Mr. Manley, from his position in front, had seen the work of Teddy and Gus, and nodded approvingly to himself.

"Good boy," he muttered. "Did that like an expert. Saved a lot of trouble then."

The herd had increased with astonishing rapidity. As they went along all grazing cattle would be gathered in the net. Three days before Mr. Manley had received word that one herd, numbering some six or seven hundred head, had wandered so far afield as to be out of reach of the line of riders. This was a piece of unexpected good fortune, for it meant that these could be left there until ready to be driven to Red Rock and delivered to Peterson. All of them, or nearly all, were steers in the technical meaning of the term, indicating that they were ready to be sold for meat. Nick had reported that they were fat and healthy; indeed, the pick of the lot.

## 158 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

Mr. Manley, as he rode along, felt a glow of satisfaction.

"These behind me will be in the corral by night," he said to himself. "Then to-morrow Teddy and Roy can take the six hundred over in the southwest part to Red Rock, and we'll be all set. Reckon I did a lot of worrying for nothing. Those Lefton boys probably gave up the ship. An' Mob Jamisson ought to be out of the country by now." As he rode he whistled a tune newly come to the X Bar X via a phonograph record: "This is my lucky day."

"It is, too," he muttered. "Reckon I'm pretty fortunate in having two sons like Teddy an' Roy. Pretty good ole world, after all!"

Nearer and nearer the corral came the driven cattle. The sun was directly overhead, beaming cruelly, causing the sweat to pour down the faces of the riders. Beneath their protecting neckerchiefs Teddy and Roy felt the perspiration streaking in rivulets down their cheeks. They were hot, dusty, and tired. But their job was still before them, and they went on without a murmur.

Occasionally an animal would break, causing confusion and necessitating quick work. But as the corral came into view, they had held most of the herd intact.

Mr. Manley glanced behind him. The cattle were lowing nervously, impatient at the slow,

steady pace they had been forced to adopt for so long a time. Another hour of this and open mutiny would take place within their ranks.

Mr. Manley motioned to Pop Burns, who was nearest, to come closer. The veteran ranger left his place in line and rode slowly around the herd and approached his boss. Wisely he waited until he was within speaking distance before asking any questions. At a moment like this any unusual sound might cause a stampede.

"Want me, boss?" he inquired quietly.

"Yep. Ride back and tell Teddy he's to take this bunch in."

"Take 'em in, hey!" The puncher whistled. "That's a right dangerous job. But I reckon he can do it. All right, boss."

He rode off. Fifteen minutes later Teddy reached his father, it having taken that long to make the circuit of the herd.

"All set, Teddy?"

"Sure thing, Dad." The boy shifted in his saddle, but smiled gamely. "Guess Flash will stand the strain. I never brought 'em in before, but there's nothing like starting. Want me to take the lead now?"

"Uh-huh. I'll ride the flank you had. Now listen. Keep 'em down for half an hour more, if you can. Then go into a trot. Soon as you get 'em moving well—let 'em ride. Get me?"

"I get you, Dad. Half and hour ought to

## 160 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

bring us pretty near. Well, so long. See you later."

"So long, Teddy."

Mr. Manley turned and rode away. Never once did he glance back. But as he took Teddy's place in line his heart was thumping madly.

## CHAPTER XIX

### INTO THE CORRAL

TEDDY, himself, realized the post of danger that he held. Behind him came some three thousand cattle—some horned and all hoofed with bone as sharp as steel. He, alone, was to guide that thunderous herd into the corral, between the wing-like gates. Half an hour more he had—then the test would come. The boy leaned low in his saddle and patted his pony's side.

“It's up to us, Flash,” he said softly. “But I'm glad dad gave me the job. It'll show what I'm good for, at least. If I fail—I sha'n't be here to know it.”

He rode onward, never increasing his pace. All thought of Jamisson, of the Lefton brothers, of the fear of rustlers, had left his mind. He concentrated on one thing—getting these cattle into the corral.

There were no more herds to be gathered in. Before him lay open country. Every animal on the range, except, of course, that one bunch of six hundred which had been purposely

## 162 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

avoided, was in that crowd of plodding beasts behind him. If a break came now it would mean disaster.

He heard a grunt of impatience from the leading cows and turned quickly. He saw heads being lowered and raised nervously. His eyes swept over a tossing sea of horns. Ten minutes more before the rush would come. Would they hold?

Flash seemed to sense the tensiety of his rider, and whinnied softly.

"Steady, boy," Teddy murmured. "Not yet. Save all you've got. We'll need it later."

A mile or so in front of him loomed the corral. Was it time yet? Could Flash carry him to safety if he started now?

He glanced back again. The cattle were closer to him, and he had not lagged. That meant that they were moving faster. Their grunts and lowings became more pronounced. A small section on the left broke into a run, goaded into activity by the long, slow march. Those in the center, directly behind Teddy, swerved to the right.

"Here it comes!" thought the boy, breathing jerkily. "Steady, Flash! Just a little faster—jus-s-s-st a little."

The pony went into the trot. The cattle saw him pulling away from them, and unconsciously,



increased their speed. The circle of riders in the rear moved forward.

Now the corral was but three-quarters of a mile away. Faster and faster came the cattle. At the instant, Teddy gave Flash his head.

The horse leaped ahead. There was a sound of thunder, and the earth shook as the herd followed madly after the lone rider. A cloud of dust arose, blotting out the sun. Through the haze the corral showed faintly.

"All you've got, baby!" Teddy panted. "Take 'em in!"

The pony flashed over the ground like a brown streak. Close on his heels came the cattle, running with all their power, pressed on by those behind. The horse was doing his best, and still he increased the distance between him and the onrushing horns not a trifle. A steer on the rampage shows tremendous speed.

Straight for the winged fences Teddy directed the pony. For a moment they were hidden from view, so thick was the dust, and when they came into sight again the boy was almost within them. And still he kept on.

When it seemed as though he must surely be swept into the corral by the beasts behind him and cut to ribbons under their hoofs, he whirled the bronco. Flash answered the call. He shot to the left, his flank nearly grazed by the horns

## 164 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

of the leaders, leaped frantically—and was clear. Teddy's part was over.

The rushing herd, unable to stop or to change direction, flowed through the gates into the corral. Those in front were smashed solidly against the fence at the extreme end. The others rushed forward, their momentum carrying them where they had no desire to go. Within four minutes it was finished—the cattle were safely within the corral, every last one of them. Sing Lung and Joe, who were waiting, rushed forward and dropped the bars. Teddy had not failed.

Mr. Manley was the first to reach the boy, and Roy was the second.

"Son, you're there! Congratulations! Boy, you sure turned that trick! Shake!"

Father and son clasped hands in a firm grip.

"Thanks, Dad," Teddy answered, grinning. "It was as much Flash as it was me. He practically did the whole thing."

"Don't let him get away with that!" Roy shouted. "Teddy, congrats! That was a big job. And you did it, too."

"You mean 'I done well'," Teddy laughed. "Baby, I'm sort of shot! Let's get off these ponies."

The men, dismounting, crowded about Teddy, shaking his hand, clapping him on the back, none too gently. And this praise was well

deserved. It was the first time the boy had been "general" of a round-up, and everything had depended on his skill in starting the rush at precisely the right moment and not swinging out of the way a second too soon. Besides this, he had to keep the pace down at the most dangerous time, half an hour before he "broke" the cattle. In these few minutes the success of a round-up is decided. It means untold labor if the leader bungles his job—and death for the bungler under the feet of the cattle.

The excitement wore off gradually, and the men sat down to their meal. The rest of the days on the round-up were to be spent on unromantic work—cutting out undesirable cattle, branding, "tailing" and so forth. Then the horses held in reserve would be needed, for this work is very wearing on the ponies. A careless puncher can easily ride a horse to death.

During the meal talk flowed freely. The men were relieved of a great responsibility, and they reacted accordingly.

"Teddy, there's one thing I'm sorry for," Roy declared, with a wink at his father.

"Yea? Well, go ahead. I suppose it's some sort of wise crack."

"Wise crack? Oh, no, nothing like that. I was thinking—"

"Well, spill it! I'm waiting."

"Golly, Teddy, your face looks as though it

## 166 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

had been painted with dirt! All in streaks.”

“What of it? What were you going to say?”

“Oh, yes. I was going to tell you something, wasn’t I? Well it was this.”

He hesitated, until everyone was listening. Then he arose and bowed.

“Teddy, my boy, if Curly could only see you now!”

## CHAPTER XX

### THE STRANGE FIRE

THE ground in the shady side of the chuck wagon resembled a small section of a battlefield where carnage had been complete. Tired bodies were sprawled in every imaginable attitude, some reclining with their heads on their hard saddles, imagining themselves comfortable, some with feet raised above the rest of their bodies by the simple method of bracing them against the wagon wheels, others lying face downward, arms outstretched. They had earned their ease, and Mr. Manley declared a vacation for the remainder of the day.

The sun touched the horizon before anyone stirred. Then Roy sat up, stretched, and poked Teddy with his foot. The boy jumped as though he had been shot.

"Only me, sweetheart," Roy said, grinning.

"Huh? Golly, you scared me! I was dreaming of that bunch of beeves and I thought I was down under 'em. What time is it?"

"Don't know. Feels like time to eat. I—"

"Hey, what's all the noise about?" Nick,

## 168 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

rubbing his eyes sleepily, looked about him. "Convention, or something?"

"Nope. Just one of Roy's cute little jokes. He had an idea he'd slept enough, so he kicked me. Needed company, I guess."

One by one the others came to life, yawing, stretching the kinks out of their muscles.

"Hey, Sing, when do we eat?"

"What's on the men-oo for supper?"

"Get offa my foot, you ape! By golly, you been sleepin' right on my laig! An' now, by jinks, that's asleep! If I don't warm you up for that—"

Gus, letting out frequent yelps, hopped about, trying to restore the circulation in the benumbed member. Pop, who was the cause of this commotion, grinned happily.

"Don't he dance well? Funny he only uses one leg. Come on, open up, Gus. Show yore stuff. One, two, three, four! Let's go! I wonder if my baby does the Charleston—Charleston—"

"Dry up, you old leather-backed coyote! Maybe you'd dance too if yore laig was sound asleep. Uh! There she is." He sat down suddenly, and glared about him. "Next time you want a pillow, you use somethin' else besides my laig."

Mr. Manley was watching the scene with an amused smile. Finally he said:

"Nick, suppose you jump that chuck wagon an' find out if Sing Lung is asleep too. If he is we'll have to get our own chow, I reckon."

"I'll wake him!" Nick declared, and pulled open the wagon door. "Hey, you Chink, come to! Time to get up!"

"Gettee out heah! Come in my klitchen, so! Out qlick! I beat you head with this!" Sing, a skillet in one hand, peered out ferociously.

"He's awake!" Jules Kolto shouted. "Now we eat for sure. But I wouldn't like to take Nick's share. He'll probably get boiled mice."

"An' I'll eat 'em too," Nick said forcibly. "I'm hungry enough to go anything. Come on, Sing, show some speed."

The cook grinned and disappeared. Half an hour later the "come an' get it" signal was sounded, and the men sat down to their third meal on the range, to which they did full justice.

Evening had settled upon the land when the punchers rested from the joyous labor of conveying food from pan to mouth. Satiated, they lit cigarettes or pipes and wandered about, talking, or sat and played cards in the waning light. Teddy and Roy stood near the corral talking to their father and watching the milling beasts within.

"Plenty of work to-morrow," said Mr. Manley. "I can spot some cows in there now that aren't ours. Look—there's a deer! See him?"



## 170 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

He pointed, and the boys saw a brown form flash past. The deer had been caught in the rush of animals and had been driven into the corral with the steers.

"Probably be more than one," Roy commented. "Say, Teddy, how tired are you?"

"Not very. Why?"

"Like to take a little ride?"

"Sure. Where to?"

"Oh, over toward the southwest part of the range."

"Uh-huh. All right, Dad?"

"Yep. Go to it. Don't stay too long, though. You've got a long ride to-morrow to Red Rock."

Teddy nodded, and went to saddle Flash. The night was cloudless, and when the two brothers started the full moon gave them ample light to see by. They rode slowly, enjoying the tang of the fall air and the beauty of the scene. Somehow, the prairie seemed soft, more friendly than it had under the hot sun.

"Any special reason for this little jaunt, Roy?" Teddy asked, after some minutes.

"Well, there might be, and then, again, there mightn't. I'd like to get a look at that herd we've got to take Peterson. Maybe it's shifted."

"Perhaps. Good idea to find out, anyhow. Wonder if we'll ever see the Lefton boys again?"

“Hope not. I’ve had my fill of them. They’re with Mob Jamisson, some place, I suppose. Thought they had us sewed up tight, did they? They’ve got another think coming.”

Teddy looked thoughtfully at his brother.

“So you think they’ve given up whatever plans they had?”

“I don’t think anything. I decided long ago that I did too much of that. We’ll take things as they come. All we’ve got to do now is to get that herd to Red Rock, and we’ll be finished. Maybe what that professor heard didn’t apply to our outfit at all.”

“You mean about having us sewed up?”

“Uh-huh. But he didn’t say that. He said he heard our name mentioned, and then came the rest of it. At least, as I remember, that’s what he told us. It’s easy to think they—I mean the Leftons and Mob Jamisson—were talking about us, then changed the subject and that stuff about sewing up tight—or cold, or whatever it was—had nothing to do with us at all.”

“Sure, you can figure that way if you want to. Just as logical. Say, look down that way. Do you see a light?”

Roy pulled rein, and stared.

“Some sort of a blaze. Let’s investigate. May be the beginnings of a fire. Golly, that would be hard luck! Come on, let’s get a wiggle

## 172 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

on. If it is a fire we want to let the rest of 'em know."

The boys leaped their ponies into a run, and as they rode forward they saw that a red glow showed in the distance.

"Kind of small for a prairie fire," Teddy called. "And it doesn't seem to get any larger."

"Let's slow down," Roy said suddenly. "That's a fire, all right. But it was made to cook stuff over, not to burn weeds."

"You mean a campfire?"

"Sure do."

"On our range, too! Now who do you suppose—"

"Soon find out. Take it easy."

They went quietly forward, and then Teddy saw that his brother had been right. It was a campfire. They could see forms moving about, crossing between them and the flame.

"Shall we have a look?" Teddy asked in a low voice.

"I'll tell a maverick we will! Let's leave the ponies here and walk. Guess we'll have to put our detective badges on again." But there was no humor in Roy's voice as he said it. A strange campfire on a range during round-up time is no joking matter.

They dismounted and picketed Flash and Star to a near-by bush. Then they proceeded on foot.

"Got a fine nerve, whoever it is," Roy remarked. "Probably thought we'd all be too tired to do much riding to-night."

They could hear the sound of voices now, making no attempt at concealment, loud in their denunciations of one of their members. As yet the boys could distinguish no individuals, but they saw that there were quite a crowd of men about the fire.

"Six, anyway," Teddy said softly. "Yep, just six. I can count 'em. Listen!"

One of the men was speaking.

"I blame you, Jamisson, for this whole business. Ever since you've been with us you've caused trouble. Once more—and you're out."

"Is that so! Well, Peterson, I've heard that story before! An' it'll take more than you and yore gang to call me out on a deal like this after I've gone this far!"

"Aw, for the love of Pete, let's cut this fightin' out!" murmured another voice. "Where'll that get us? Go ahead with your story, Peterson."

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE RUSTLERS' CAMP

TEDDY and Roy sank back into the shadows. Peterson! And the others were Mob Jamisson and the Lefton boys! There were two strangers with them.

"Well, I wanted to express my opinion of this bird," Peterson growled. "I'm getting the raw end of this deal, and I take the most chances, too. Suppose that Manley bunch finds out I'm in with you? I'd walk right into their hands and it 'ud mean a nice long jail sentence for me. The rest of you can keep out of sight, but I've got to play close to the ground."

"All right, all right! We know all that. Let's have the plan now!"

"Pipe down and I'll tell you. Here's the dope." He lowered his voice, and the boys crept closer, listening eagerly. Chance had given them this opportunity to foil the rustlers, and they were going to make the most of it. Roy, seizing his brother's arm in a firm grip, leaned forward.

"This herd we want is about three miles from here, in a little valley," Peterson went on. "It's the only herd they left out of the round-up, for which we're duly grateful." And he chuckled meaningly. "We've got to work fast, because old man Manley will start for that herd first thing in the morning. Of course it won't be where he expects to find it, but it won't take him long to locate it, unless we follow the plan I've outlined."

"Well, tell us about it. Mike an' Ginger haven't heard it yet." Jerry Lefton nodded toward the two strangers.

"Here it is. From this valley to the Jarmey place is only a short distance. I found that out, and I'm not even a Westerner. We shoot those cattle through there soon as it gets daylight."

"That means no sleep to-night," the man called Ginger growled.

"Well, what of it? You're not in this business for your health, you know. Now listen. We drive the cows to the Jarmey place. And right here I want to make sure of one thing. Jerry, how about those cars?"

"They're O.K. Bill and I sent 'em down yesterday. We found a whole train of empties on the siding above Eagles, and simply rode 'em down grade to Jarmey's. Nothin' to it. Give you credit for thinkin' of that idea, Pete."

"How many cars?"

"Thirty-three. Enough?"

"Plenty. We can get 'em all in. Well, we load 'em as soon as we get there. From then on it's a cinch. We simply run the cars as far as they'll go—to the end of the line, that'll be, and then unload 'em, eight miles from Jarmey's."

"There's that eight-mile business!" Roy whispered. "Down grade from Jarmey's, too! Snakes, we—"

Teddy cautioned him to silence by nudging him. Peterson was talking again.

"We'll hide 'em there for a while, then drive 'em further on. We can alter the brands anytime. That Manley gang won't have a chance of catching us, even when they do find out their cows have left them without saying when they'd be back. You see, they'd have to go all the way around Shock Mountain. We go straight through, following the railroad. Get it?"

"Sure do! That's a sweet little scheme." Bill Lefton waxed enthusiastic. "Haven't got much to say against that, hey, Mob?"

"Sounds all right," Mob answered grudgingly. "Wait till we see what happens. I don't never count my chickens before they're hatched."

"You'll get no hen to set by that plan," Peterson laughed, pleased at Lefton's compli-



ment. "Well, I guess that's all. Now we might as well try to get an hour's sleep. No more—we can't afford to be late. Throw a few sticks on that fire, will you, Bill?"

"Sure thing."

Bill arose suddenly, and plunged into the brush.

"Teddy! Lie low! We're—"

"Mob! Pete! Come here, quick! Hi, Jerry! Here's—"

Teddy drew back his fist and caught Bill Lefton full on the jaw. The boy turned to follow Roy, tripped over a vine, fought for his balance, and fell prone.

The next moment he felt the wind go out of him, and his head hit the ground with a thud.

"I've got this one! Chase the other! Come into the light, you!"

There was no need to go after Roy. When he saw his brother had fallen, he turned and lashed out furiously with his fists. But the darkness favored the rustlers, rather than Roy, for the boy could not see the faces before him. A blow on the body was of no avail, due to the heavy clothing worn by the cattle thieves.

"Sock him! Don't shoot, you'll hit one of us!"

Mob Jamisson and Jerry Lefton jumped Roy at the same instant. His senses reeled as the butt of a gun struck him a blow on the forehead,

## 178 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

knocking off his hat. He felt his arms pinned roughly to his sides. The brief and uneven fight was over.

"Drag 'em in, an' we'll have a look at 'em," someone said grimly. "Spies, hey? Know what we do with spies? We—well, for the love of sweet William! It's the Manley boys!"

"What? Let's see. By jinks, you're right!" Bill Lefton tilted Roy's head back by pressing up on his chin. "Roy Manley! And his brother Teddy! Well, well, well! Think of that! Lost you're knife again, my lad?"

Roy answered nothing. He stared intently into the eyes of the man before him.

"Ain't this luck!" Mob exulted. "Now maybe I can finish what I started a few days ago. I won't miss this time, either." He raised a gun menacingly.

"None of that, you fool! They may not be alone! Put that down!" Peterson seized the man's arm angrily. "Want the whole country to know we're here?"

Jamisson growled something, but lowered the weapon.

"Hand me a rope, Bill," Peterson commanded. "We'll truss 'em up for a while. We can decide later what to do with 'em."

"I know what I'd do," Jamisson said shortly. "An' I will yet, if I can."

The boys were bound and then thrown roughly

to the ground. They lay there, dazed, with Peterson standing over them.

“Roy and Teddy Manley,” he said softly. “And they walked right into our hands! Well, boys, we’ll see what sort of entertainment we can furnish.”

## CHAPTER XXII

### CAPTIVES

"You know 'em?" Mike asked, pointing with his thumb to the two boys.

"Know 'em? Listen, brother!" Peterson paused impressively. "These are the sons of old man Manley who owns the X Bar X. Does it penetrate now?"

"It sure does! Well I'm locoed! It's their cattle we're—"

Peterson seized the man by the shoulder and spun him around.

"Quiet, you idiot!" he whispered angrily. "If they don't know about it, what's the use of telling them?"

"They know, all right," Mob Jamisson growled. He knelt down, and, seizing Teddy's arm, pulled him to a sitting posture. "Listen, you! How long you been hidin' out there?"

Teddy stared straight at the man.

"It's none of your business," he said deliberately.

"Isn't, hey? Talk up, now, or—" He clutched the boy by the throat and shook him

savagely. "You'll answer me, an' sudden, too!"

Roy, his head spinning from the blow he had received, heard Teddy gasp in agony. He struggled to one elbow.

"Let him alone, you coward!" he shouted, tears of rage coming to his eyes. "Let him up—"

Bound as he was, he crawled nearer. Oblivious of consequences, realizing only that his brother was in pain, he kicked out with both feet, as hard as he could. They caught Jamisson in the small of his back, bowling him over, and causing him to release his hold on Teddy's throat.

"Thanks, Roy," the boy gasped. "Guess this is the finish for both of us. So long—"

Jamisson, inarticulate in his anger, leaped to his feet and drew his gun.

"Try an' stop this one!" he yelled. "I'll blow you so far—"

Without a word Peterson stooped, picked up a stick, and brought it down solidly on Jamisson's gun arm. The weapon fell to the ground.

"When I say a thing, I mean it," he said calmly. "There'll be no gun-play. You got only what you deserved. What good would choking him do? Now you pipe down. Get over on the other side of the fire. I'm not going

## 182 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

to have this deal spoiled by you, just because you can't keep your temper. Jerry, watch him. If he starts anything let him have it." He stopped, and Jamisson, like a beaten dog, walked slowly away. "That's it. Now you pay attention to me, you two boys."

He motioned to the others to move to one side, so that he might have a clear view of the captives.

"You know me," he continued. "And now you know something else, and that is that we're after some cattle of your father's. I suppose you heard our plans. No use trying to pretend any longer. I aim to get the cattle, and that forfeit, too, when he can't deliver. Figure out why I'm telling you this?"

Teddy shook his head. He could not trust himself to reply.

"It's because you'll never make use of the information until it's too late. Oh, don't get scared—I don't mean any killing. We're not all fools." He glanced toward Jamisson. "But we'll keep you tied up here until the whole thing is finished. Ginger, you'll have to stay and guard 'em. Reckon you won't mind that. Relieves you of a lot of work." Ginger grinned, and nodded. "After two or three days we'll turn you loose."

"You going to keep 'em here?" Bill Lefton asked in surprise.

"Well, where else? What's the matter with this place?"

"It's too near their friends, that's what's the matter with it! We'll have to shift 'em. There's a spot four miles from here in the timber where they won't be found for ten years. I say we drag 'em over."

Peterson paused, and thought.

"You're right," he said finally. "That means we'll have to start now. Come on, break camp. Bill, bring up the broncs. Where are your ponies?" He looked intently at Roy.

The boy thought swiftly. Would it be better to refuse to tell him? If Flash and Star wandered into camp riderless, Mr. Manley would know something was up and send out a searching party. But if they did get a chance to escape, they would be helpless without horses. Best to have the ponies brought along.

"Near a bush, over that way," Roy replied.

Peterson nodded. "Round 'em up, Jerry, and bring 'em in. Ginger, don't forget what I told you. You're responsible for these boys."

His orders were obeyed promptly and without question, except by Jamisson, who declared he would not "play no val-let for no fool of an Easterner." But he was wise enough to confine his objections to talk.

Mounted once more on Flash and Star, with their hands bound firmly behind them, Teddy



and Roy rode into the darkness, guarded by horsemen riding on each side of them and in the rear. Their way led through underbrush and into a forest, so deep that the light of the moon scarcely penetrated. For about half an hour they rode, then Bill Lefton, who was leading, called a halt.

"This is it. Couldn't find a better place. O.K.?"

The boys saw that they had come to a small clearing in the bottom of a gully. Roy thought bitterly that Lefton's words were true—that no one would find them here in ten years.

"This'll do," Peterson said, with satisfaction. "Help 'em off, someone. I'll mosey around and find a good place to tie 'em."

He selected a tree with a thick trunk, and the boys were forced to sit, one on either side of it, while ropes were bound around them, encircling the tree. The tree was thick enough to prevent either from reaching back and untying the other.

"There, that's over," Peterson muttered, and straightened. "About time we started. Ginger, remember what I told you!"

"We're goin' now—without no sleep?" Jamisson asked, his face expressing disgust.

"We are. You'll get plenty of sleep later. Look, Ginger—here's water and food. Feed 'em when they're hungry and give 'em water

when they need it. And stay right here all the time! Get me? Don't move till you hear from us, which will probably be to-morrow some time. Get me?"

"Sure thing. An' they won't get away. I got somethin' here that's a great little pacifier." He patted his gun significantly. "So long. Good luck."

Peterson nodded in answer, and remounted.

"Let's go, boys. We've got plenty to do. Ginger, watch your step. See you later."

Teddy and Roy heard the horses crash their way through the brush. One by one the riders filed into the woods. For many minutes the boys could hear the sounds of their departure. Then, silence.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### TOO LATE

GINGER walked over and looked down upon the captive boys. He grinned good-naturedly.

"Well," he said slowly, "I reckon it's our day. Hope you boys are comfortable. If you want anything, sing out. Um. It's fine weather to-night. Yep, it sure is fine weather."

Ginger sat down, and rolled a cigarette.

"You boys thirsty?"

Teddy, who was facing him, said he was. His throat was burning still from Jamisson's clutch. Ginger held the canteen to the boy's lips, and Teddy drank deep.

"Thanks," he said. "Could you loosen us just a little? My arm—"

Ginger grinned, and shook his head.

"That's one thing I can't do. Reckon you'll have to sleep as best you can. Hungry?"

"No," Roy replied shortly.

He felt it was useless to argue. This guard, while good-natured enough, could not be coerced into giving them their freedom. Roy realized that, and decided to bide his time. Perhaps

something would turn up before morning. He could hear Star whinnying close by, where he and Flash had been picketed. Roy thought that if he could manage to slip his bonds and overpower Ginger he and Teddy might still save their cattle. But now was no time to try it, while the guard was watching them. If he would only fall asleep!

But Ginger was not the sort to give in to weariness when he was told to watch. He sat quietly, puffing on his cigarette, staring at the captives. Time dragged interminably. The silence of the woods seemed oppressive, overpowering. Roy felt his muscles tense with an effort at control. Anything would be better than this monotony.

"How long are you going to keep us here?" he asked suddenly.

Ginger shrugged his shoulders. "Can't say. Till morning, anyhow. Maybe someone will ride back by that time."

Another period of silence. Roy strained his ears for the slightest sound, hoping, desperately, that someone would come. But who? They had not been gone long enough for his father to become worried and start to searching for them. Even then, it was useless to expect them to find this hiding place. It was too well concealed.

Suddenly he started, nerves taut. Was not

that a stick that broke behind him? There! Surely he heard a footstep!

"Any idea of the time?" he asked loudly. "Suppose you haven't got a watch. Not many punchers carry 'em. I remember when I first got one. Thought I was king of the rock. Only a small wrist-watch, but, believe me, I was sure proud of it. My dad gave it to me. Bet I have it yet some place. Funny how you hang on to those things. Like an elk's tooth, or a rabbit's foot. Sort of charm, you know. I knew a puncher that used to—"

A figure stepped quickly from the shadows and stood over Ginger. A club was raised and brought down swiftly, landing on the man's head with a dull thud. Without a sound, his body relaxed, and he sprawled on the ground, senseless.

The figure bent down and felt of the rustler's heart.

"Just stunned," he remarked, relief in his voice. He straightened, and Roy uttered an exclamation.

"Mohammed!"

"Professor Sullivan, if you please. I have discarded my robes. I find them cumbersome in situations of this sort. Now if you'll just hold still a second—"

He knelt and felt for the rope that held the two boys. Teddy craned his neck around, dis-

belief in his eyes, unable to credit their good fortune.

"Professor! Boy, we're sure glad to see you! How in thunder—"

"That shall be later. It is imperative now that you regain your freedom as soon as possible." He smiled. "Using the trade by which I make my livelihood—which, by the way, is guess-work—I should say that those who bound you and left this man as a guard are now on an errand which you would like to intercept as soon as possible."

"I'll tell a maverick we would! They're rustlers after our cattle! Here, get this knot untied. That's the stuff. Ah!" Roy stretched, feeling the blood flowing through his cramped veins. Then he leaped to his feet, as did Teddy. "We can't thank you now, professor, because we're in an awful hurry. You know where our ranch is. Come over there, and we'll do more than thank you! Come on, Teddy, let's get the brones! Thank goodness, they brought 'em along."

The two boys dashed into the brush, to appear in a moment astride their horses.

"We got to go!" Teddy shouted. "Can you get back all right? Have you got your wagon?"

"Not the wagon. That is broken. But Stamboul waits patiently for me. I shall ride him."

"Will you look after him?" Roy asked, point-

ing to the unconscious man. "He's all right—I wouldn't like to see him badly hurt. And we may want to question him later."

"I will. Good luck to you!"

"Thanks! Let's go, Teddy! Straight out!"

The horses leaped forward. Through the woods they dashed, careless of low hanging branches, intent only on reaching their cattle in time. The boys gave their broncos their heads, trusting to their surefootedness to bring them through safely.

Their trust was not misplaced. Flash and Star, as though they realized that their masters depended on them, ran swiftly, dodging in and out of the brush, until they reached the open prairie. Roy gave a shout of exultation.

"Now we're all set, Teddy! Baby, if we're only on time! We've got a run of about five miles. Lucky there's a moon—we can see where we're going. Step on it, boy!"

For answer Teddy raised his reins, the signal for every Western pony to "spread himself." Flash jumped ahead. Roy, not a moment behind, urged Star to his best speed. This was no time for considering either man or beast. Both boys knew the stuff of which their horses were made. They would last—they would have to last!

They headed for the southwest corner of the range. Their one chance was to get there be-



fore the rustlers, and then, when they came, to bluff them off. Since Peterson and his gang could not expect to see them, thinking them still captives, this was not a vain hope. Unarmed as they were, if they could force the rustlers to believe that they had been released by their friends, who were with them, they might yet save their cattle.

The ponies were panting now, but still they kept up their tremendous speed. The ground seemed to fly from beneath their feet. Nearer and nearer they came to the spot where the cows were herded. It could not be more than two miles more. Neither boy spoke, concentrating his energies for the race against time.

In the distance Shock Mountain arose, huge and weird in the moonlight. Not far now! They could almost see the black blot of the herd of steers as they stood in the lee of the mountain. Teddy craned his neck forward, peering ahead intently. Another half mile, and they would be there. The valley wherein the cattle were grazing came into view.

"Guess we'll make it!" Roy shouted. "Here's where Peterson said they were! Can you see 'em? Can you—"

Then they topped a rise, and the whole landscape spread out before them, every object plainly visible. The moon-lit scene was as light as day.

## 192 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

Teddy's eyes swept over the valley. Were they on time?

He gave a groan and drooped over his saddle. Their race had been useless. There was not a sign of the six hundred head! The rustlers had beaten them!

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE TRAIN OF EMPTIES

WHEN one has counted so heavily on something, has worked desperately for it, the moment when one realizes failure seems so definite, so unrelieved, that the world spins on unnoticed. Teddy and Roy sat in their saddles, staring down into the valley, despair written in every line of their faces.

"Too late," Teddy stammered. "We've lost. They've started the drive. Even if we could catch them, what would be the use? They'd never abandon the cattle now without a fight. And what have we got to fight with? Roy, we're done! We're done!"

Roy nodded miserably.

"Looks like it. By the time we got help it would be too late. We're miles from our camp now. Let me think. We've got to do something. But what? They'll take the cattle to the Jarmey place. Think, Teddy! Think!"

"The Jarmey place!" Teddy fairly shouted the words. "We'll have to head for there!"

Now we've got it—our one chance! Can we find it, Roy?"

"We'll find it," Roy answered grimly. "I know, from what Pop told us, the general direction. Once we get there—"

"We'll think of that later," Teddy interrupted. "The thing to do is to reach those empty cars before they load the cattle. Golly, we're sure giving these broncs of ours a workout! But they'll stand it, I reckon."

"Hope so," Roy murmured, patting Star affectionately. "We can't afford to let 'em rest now—we've got to go on." He swung the pony about and headed away from the valley, Teddy following. It was not possible to force the horses to the speed they had showed on the ride over. They were covered with foam, and the tiny nerves in their backs were twitching from the effort they had made.

"We'll be good for another hour, and that's all," Roy declared. He had to keep a tight rein, for Star, keyed up as he was to the pitch of excitement, would have taken his opportunity to run fiercely until he dropped from exhaustion. But Roy was a wise rider.

The horses were cantering, but not with that abandonment which means a mile or so at top speed, then the finish. They might find the Jarmey place easily. And, on the other hand, they might have to look for hours.

They rode along, neither boy saying much, with a strange feeling that this journey was to be endless, that they were fated to ride forever over the moon-bathed prairie, up hills, into valleys, skirting groves of poplars and evergreens, now and then leaping small streams. What neither realized was that, from lack of sleep and food, they were getting a trifle light-headed.

"Must have moved it," Teddy said suddenly, and laughed shortly. Roy looked at him sharply. He pulled Star nearer to his brother's horse and, leaning over, rested a hand on Teddy's arm.

"Feel all right, old boy?"

"Me? Sure! Why shouldn't I? Throat is dry and got a little headache. When I see Mob Jamisson again I'll give him a headache! Where in thunder are we going, any how?"

"To the old station at the Jarmey place."

"Oh, snakes, I know that! I mean are we headed in the right direction?"

Teddy did not hear the sigh of relief his brother gave. But when Roy spoke his voice had a note of hope in it.

"I think so, Teddy. We'll soon know, anyway. If I'm right it'll be over the next hill. We've been going upgrade for the last half hour, and the station is pretty high—Pop told us that."

He stopped and peered ahead. It was fully three hours since they had left the camp of the rustlers. All that time they had been riding with hope of success driving them on. For the first time Roy felt a wave of lassitude sweep over him. Savagely he fought it off and gritted his teeth. This was no time for sleep. Sleep! What had he thought of that for? Sleep! How pleasant it would be to let his head drop forward and drift off—off—

“Hey! Come out of it! Buck up there, boy! We’ve got plenty ride ahead of us. Don’t cave in like that!”

“Huh? You talk—talking to me? Oh! Hang it all, I did doze for a minute, didn’t I?” Roy shook himself and sat straighter in the saddle. “That sock on the head must have made me a bit goofy. I’m O.K. now. Golly, Teddy, I think we’re almost there! Listen! Can you hear anything?”

Teddy pulled his pony to a sliding stop and strained his ears. Then he uttered an exclamation.

“Cattle on the march! Over to the left! We’re on time, Roy! We’re on time! Head for the station!”

“Straight ahead, isn’t it? Can we make that hill? Take a good start up. Now—”

Teddy felt Flash rear and leap forward. The loose stones gave a precarious footing, and for

a moment the boy feared that the pony would go over backward. But he recovered himself, and lowering his head plunged onward.

The noise of the cattle became more distinct. They must be about half a mile to the left, where the level ground allowed cattle to be loaded into the cars.

"We've got to make it—rustlers or no rustlers!" Roy panted. "If they're guarding the cars we'll take a chance and run through 'em! If I get hit, you keep on. Remember that!"

The shouts of the men driving the cows toward the railroad could now be heard, and Roy and Teddy dug heels into their ponies' sides. Exhausted as the horses were from their long, hard ride, still they responded bravely, and digging their forefeet into the hill strove to carry their masters to the top.

"If we can reach the cars without being seen—" Roy gasped.

The sentence was left unfinished, for he realized that Teddy knew what was in his mind. They had one chance to save their cattle, and a slim chance it was.

The empties, they knew, stood on a steep grade. It was this incline which the rustlers counted on as a means of getting the cars started and carrying the cows to a place where they could be unloaded without fear of interruption. This place was at the end of the line.



## 198 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

Thirty-three cars, loaded with heavy steers, would easily coast eight miles, given a good start.

If they could reach the train before the rustlers discovered them and release the brakes, the train would start, and then nothing could stop it. Peterson's work would go for naught. The cattle would have to be left where they were, for they could never be driven far enough to be hidden from the punchers of the X Bar X.

These thoughts were whirling through the minds of Teddy and Roy as they spurred their horses up the steep hill.

Ahead of them they saw a long line of mounds, looking like a caravan of camels in the moonlight. As they came nearer the contours took on a more angular form.

"The cars! We've won, Teddy! We've won! Go on—go on! This is the last lap, Teddy boy!"

Panting fiercely, the boys dashed toward the line of empties, standing motionless on the tracks at the top of the hill. At the same minute they heard a shot and a bullet whined by overhead.

"They've seen us!" Roy gasped. "Ride, Teddy, ride!"

Far to the left they could see a huge herd of cattle—their cattle. Men were dashing fran-

tically about, spectres in the night. Streaks of fire flashed into the blackness and winked out, and the solos of the bullets merged into a chorus. The bright moonlight threw the two riders into silhouette, a perfect mark for the rustlers. Suddenly Star faltered, stumbled, went on more slowly.

“He’s hit!” Roy groaned. “Star, don’t give up! Stick to it, boy! Stick to it!”

The pony whinnied with pain, but fought his way doggedly up the hill. A little more! Just another hundred yards!

“They’ve left the cattle! They’re after us!” Teddy shouted. “Ride low!”

In front of them loomed the cars. Roy heard the wood splinter as the bullets pinged into them. Up—up!

“Hop it, Roy! Hit the ground! Let the ponies go; they’ll find their way back!”

At the top of the hill both boys sprang from their mounts. They turned them loose and saw them scamper away, their heels flying in the air. They were headed for home.

The rustlers had come to the bottom of the hill, and now they started up, sensing the plan of action. They shot as they came, hoping a lucky bullet might find the mark. But now Teddy was on the side of one of the freight cars, climbing up the ladder to the top. Roy sprang for the next car.

## 200 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

"The brakes—release 'em!" Roy shouted. "Start from the other end! Release every car! She'll start herself!"

He ran to the front, and Teddy to the rear. Thirty-three cars make a long train, and never had a freight seemed so long to the young ranchers as they strove to get it started down-grade before the rustlers reached them. Frantically they turned the brake wheels, jumping from one car to another, while hot lead split the air on each side of them. Luckily, not all the brakes were on, or they would never have succeeded. At last Roy turned one of the wheels, and felt the train give a lurch.

"She's started! Take 'em off, Teddy! Any more on?"

"Can't tell yet. Here's one!"

He kicked the cog loose and spun the wheel. For a moment nothing happened. Then a groaning of metal on metal, a creaking of wood, an exultant shout from the boys, and they threw themselves flat on the car roof as the train, gaining momentum every second, pushed through the ranks of firing rustlers and like an invincible iron monster started on its journey down-grade—without the cattle!

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE RODEO

THE cars were old and their joints rusty, and the noise they made as they rumbled along resembled an avalanche. The pistol shots, puncturing the roar, sounded like the popping of corks.

“Try to stop us now!” Roy shouted gleefully. “Yow! Ride ’em, cowboy! Out of my way!”

The rustlers had reached the top of the hill and were firing desperately. One of them sought to leave his horse and catch the last car, but his pony shied, and threw the man from his back, to go tumbling down the steep embankment.

“Have a sleigh-ride!” Teddy called. “Tell us when you hit bottom!”

Bill Lefton tried to swing his pony and ride parallel with the moving freight, but the road bed was too narrow, and his horse, with a neigh of protest, refused to follow this rumbling Juggernaut, then whirled, and almost on its haunches, started down the slope. [The train

## 202 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

picked up speed rapidly, and amid a fusillade of ineffectual shots it rounded a curve, bearing Teddy and Roy to safety.

The last glimpse the boys had of the rustlers was the sight of Peterson waving his arms madly and shaking his fist—not at them, but at one of his gang.

“Mob Jamisson having the law laid down to him,” Teddy chuckled. “They’ll blame him for this, sure as shooting. Boy, we’ve saved the cattle! They’ll never be able to drive ’em far enough to hide ’em before we’re on their necks.” He drew a deep breath. “Yes, it was worth it—it sure was worth it.”

They sat up now, and drew closer together. They had flung themselves flat when the train began to move, one in the middle of the center car—which, they afterwards discovered, was the key car—and the other at the end. It was Teddy who had released the brake which really set the train in motion.

The grade was not very steep at this point, and the speed at which the cars were running was not high enough to be dangerous. Teddy sat for a moment watching the scenery “roll by,” as he expressed it, and then he grinned.

“I just happened to think,” he said, “that dad has Peterson’s deposit. Maybe he’ll come and claim it—maybe not!”

“The only deposit he’ll get will be deposited

in jail," Roy said laughingly. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for them to be seated on top of a freight car, at two o'clock in the morning, running downgrade toward the end of the line. Gone was their weariness—their thirst. All they thought of was that they had succeeded—the cattle were saved—a good night's work had been well done.

The train jolted and swung along. Teddy and Roy sat on the board which runs along the top, the walking plank, arms about their knees, swaying from side to side with the motion, happy, contented. They would soon come to the end of the line, not far from Hawley. They could rout the sheriff out of bed, organize a posse, and chase Peterson and his crowd from here to the borders of the state—farther, if necessary. The cattle would be safe until they rounded them up with the others, to-morrow. Yes, it was a good night's work.

The grade was leveling off now, and the train ran more slowly. It reached a curve, on the right of which the ground dipped, so that they had a clear view for miles.

"Teddy! Take a look!"

Far to the right the lights of a town glimmered.

"That's Hawley! Let's get off here. No telling how far this train will run, and the end of the line is much farther from Hawley than this is. It stops away off in some deserted hole,

## 204 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

Pop said. Get busy with those brakes. Hawley, Ha-a-a-aw-ley!" he cried, in the manner of a conductor announcing a station. "All out for Hawley!"

They ran from one car to another, applying the hand brakes. When the train had slackened speed sufficiently they climbed down the ladder and jumped to the ground.

"Now we've got a nice little jaunt," Roy said, peering toward Hawley. "But it might be worse. So long, old Twentieth-century!" He waved his hand as the train, barely moving, disappeared around a curve. "You sure helped us out of a bad hole! Come on, Teddy—get those legs of yours moving. *One, two, three, four! One, two, three, four!*"

They set out joyfully, and in an hour reached the town, tired, but still happy. Hawley was a fair-sized place and they found a restaurant on the main street open. There was a telephone within, and they called the sheriff. At first he was angry at having his sleep disturbed, but when the boys told them who they were, he declared eagerly that he'd be right down. He was as good as his word. Not five minutes elapsed before he entered the door of the restaurant, fully dressed, two guns hanging from his belt.

The boys soon explained the situation to him, and then he, in his turn, sat down at the 'phone and called many numbers. His orders were



short and to the point. His men were to arise, saddle their horses, and meet him at the Alpha in six minutes—no longer. “Understand? All right! ’bye!”

When he had finished he turned to the boys.

“So you rode the empties down to here! Well, well! Boys, that’s as good as a movie. Now listen. You ought to be pretty tired. I told my wife that you’d be right over to the house, and to get a room ready. You sleep—hear me? We’ll finish this job for you. We’ll let yore dad know where you are right quick, so he won’t worry. Then we’ll take the trail of them rustlers. Mob Jamisson with ’em, hey? Well, I’ll be plumb glad to see him again, not sayin’ the same fer him. My house is the fifth one down on this side of the street. Red brick. You can’t miss it. Just ring the bell. Mary’s up, an’ waitin’ fer you. Here comes my gang.”

He hesitated as the sound of the arrival of several horses sounded outside the door.

“I’ll go now. Don’t worry about yore dad. I’ll let him know first thing. We can find his camp all right if it’s anywheres on the X Bar X. Tell you a secret—I used to work fer that ranch when I was a kid. That was when yore grandfather had it. Well, so long! Pete—” to the man behind the counter—“if they’re hungry, you feed ’em an’ charge it to me. So long, boys!”

## 206 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

Hungry? Weren't they, though! They scarcely saw the sheriff burst through the door nor heard the noise of his departure. They were intent on a whole ham which hung in a glass-enclosed refrigerator.

"Could we—could we have some of that?" Roy asked, pointing.

"Ham? You betcha! Fried ham an' eggs. Sliced tomatoes. Potatoes. Coffee. Pie a-la-mode. O.K.?"

"I'll tell a maverick it is!"

Then they sat down to the best meal they ever remembered eating. At three o'clock in the morning, just these two, in the restaurant in Hawley, they ate until they could eat no more. When they had finished, the waiter looked at them critically.

"I'm thinkin'," he said softly, "that they don't need no bed to-night. Maybe the sheriff's house is only down a block, but they'll never make it, unless they walk in their sleep."

He moved softly to one side and turned low the light. Quietly he tiptoed to the door and closed it behind him. And Roy and Teddy, their heads resting on their arms, feet tucked under them, slept the remainder of that eventful night on a table in the restaurant in Hawley.

They awoke to find the sunlight streaming in on their faces and a voice, miles off, calling:

"Hey! Come to! 'Phone for you! 'Phone!"

"What? Somebody wants us? What time is it? Gosh, this bed is hard! Well, for the love of Pete—"

Teddy, gazing about him stupidly, found the waiter grinning down at him. It took a full minute for realization to come to the boy, and another minute to explain to Roy. Sleep had sunk them so deep that they simply could not understand what had occurred. Finally, however, Pete convinced them that they were really in Hawley, and, what was more important, that Mr. Manley was on the 'phone.

"Dad!" Roy exclaimed, jumping. "I'll take it, Teddy. Where's that 'phone? Huh? Oh!" Almost next to his elbow, and he could scarcely see it. He picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Dad! Sure! Fine! Right next to me. Yep, he's all right too. Sort of sleepy. We fell asleep on a restaurant table—stayed there all night. Get up there, Teddy. What's that, Dad? Say it again, will you? You caught—" He turned to his brother, eyes shining with excitement.

"Teddy, they caught the rustlers! Every one of 'em! The sheriff found our camp, and dad and the others went right out on the trail. Here, Dad, tell Ted. He won't believe me."

Then Teddy:

"Hello, Dad! Is that straight? Got 'em all? And the cattle? Oh, boy! What luck! Say,

## 208 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

how about Flash and Star? Came home? You! That's a relief! How's Star? That's good." Aside:

"He says Star wasn't hurt much. Bullet just grazed him." Into the 'phone again:

"Where'd you get the rustlers, Dad? Uh-huh! Tried to drive the cattle away after all, did they? Didn't think they were that stupid. Probably figured we'd ride to the end of the line and wouldn't be able to get help before morning. Listen, Dad—did you get Mob Jamisson? Well, hold him for me—he owes me a new hat! Yep. All right, Dad! Want me to tell Roy anything?" A pause, and a grin stole over Teddy's face. He looked at his brother and winked. "Sure thing, Dad! Tell 'em we'll see 'em this afternoon! So long, Dad!"

The receiver clicked down. Pete, the waiter, was watching the two brothers with an amused smile.

"Dad wanted me to tell you something," Teddy said slowly.

"Well, what?"

"Oh, maybe you won't be glad to hear it. I don't know. Perhaps I'd better wait till later. I don't like to—"

"Tell me now, you Indian! What is it?"

"Well, he wants us to get home as soon as we can, because Nell and Curly are there and

they're going to see us in the rodeo! So, hit the trail, cowboy—hit the trail!"

A perfect fall day, with the bright sun laughing down on a scene of vivid beauty. Flags flying in the fresh breeze. Bands playing. Girls, in picture hats, gazing forward eagerly. Cow punchers, resplendent in silver mounted belts, checkered shirts, and big woolly chaps, swaggering proudly about. A crowd roaring its approval of a man in the center of the arena astride a bucking, twisting bronco. The rodeo!

The governor of the state had a box directly in the center of the grandstand. Next to his was the Manley box.

Within it sat Mr. and Mrs. Manley, with Belle Ada, Nell Willis, and Ethel—no, curly—Carew. And one other. In the rear, inconspicuous as possible, a little man, tanned of face, with blue, kindly eyes, looked out upon the scene. It was Mohammed Ben Ali Suliman—alias Professor Sullivan, psychologist. He leaned forward and touched Mr. Manley on the shoulder.

"Does—er—our boy ride soon?"

"Teddy, you mean? Yep. Next. Did you see Roy win that Pony Express contest? Man, I've been with him all my life, and never knew he could ride like that. First prize! Great, eh? Look—that man's finished. There he goes!"

The rider gave a shout and flew over the

## 210 X Bar X Boys at the Round-Up

pony's head. He was out of the race, but he arose gamely and shook his fist in mock rage at the horse that had unseated him, then walked, a trifle unsteadily, to the side.

"Teddy rides now?" Mrs. Manley asked in a small voice.

"Sure, Mother! An' don't you worry! He'll take that bronc under his wing as easy as pie. Watch! Here he comes!"

A yell went up as another rider shot out from a corner, seated on a bit of leaping horse-flesh. Roy, who stood leaning against the fence, shouted:

"Stick with him, boy! Hang on! You! Atta baby! Look at him go—! Oh, look at him go! Sweet daddy! You're sure ridin' now, Teddy! Don't go to leather! Yay! Ride 'im, cowboy!"

And Teddy did "ride 'im." For every trick of the squirming pony, he knew a better one. Up went his hat, and down on the bronco's flank. He was fanning him, and the crowd, quick to realize that here was no ordinary rider, roared delightedly.

Excitement reigned in the Manley box.

"Oh, Mr. Manley, isn't he *wonderful*!"

"Splendid! Teddy's splendid!" Mrs. Manley forgot her momentary fears and gave way to the occasion, cheering with the rest.

"Dad, he's sticking—he's sticking!" shouted Belle, wild with joy and excitement.



Finally the pony gave up. Head lowered, breath coming in gasps, he submitted to the guiding rein. Over to the judges' stand the boy rode him, as easily as though he had been a saddle horse for years. Teddy had won.

Roy, unable to contain himself, jumped the fence, ran into the arena, and, reaching up, grasped his brother's hand. Those in the stand saw the occurrence, and another yell went up. Brother greeting brother—two expert riders, each a prize winner! The crowd went wild. Here was romance, real Western life.

"Teddy, congrats!" Roy said. "You're a rider, boy!"

"And how about you?" Teddy laughed, looking down at Roy. "The same thing goes for you! You wait, and we'll bring our cups over together. Hold this bronc a second."

He dismounted, and another puncher took the horse away. Those in the Manley box were watching with eager eyes.

"I believe," Professor Sullivan said slowly, "that riding like this has its place among the arts. When I return to my college I shall suggest that they add a Chair of Horsemanship to their curriculum. My dear Mr. Manley, let me congratulate you. I shall leave it to our two friends—" he smiled at Nell and Curly, who sat entranced, hands tightly clasped—"to con-



gratulate our boys. That was wonderful riding."

"If I'm not mistaken," Mr. Manley chuckled, "that gets Teddy a first prize. And Roy won the Pony Express contest. Not bad, hey, Barbara?" He turned to Mrs. Manley. "What do you think of these boys of mine? They save my cattle for me, get the sheriff after the rustlers, get 'em captured an' put in jail, then come back an' win two first prizes? Well, mother, what about it? How about those two boys of mine?"

Mrs. Manley looked at her husband and smiled. Then she saw coming toward them Roy and Teddy, each one carrying a silver cup. They strode along, heads held high, the light of conquest shining in their eyes. Two horses stood awaiting them—Star and Flash. They mounted, and rode over to the Manley box. As they approached they held the cups out and grinned.

"Yes, Bardwell," Mrs. Manley said softly, "they're fine boys, those sons of yours. But you musn't forget—" she smiled again—"I'm not to be left out of this! They're mine, too!"

THE END

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